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Charles Platt on Alfred Bester

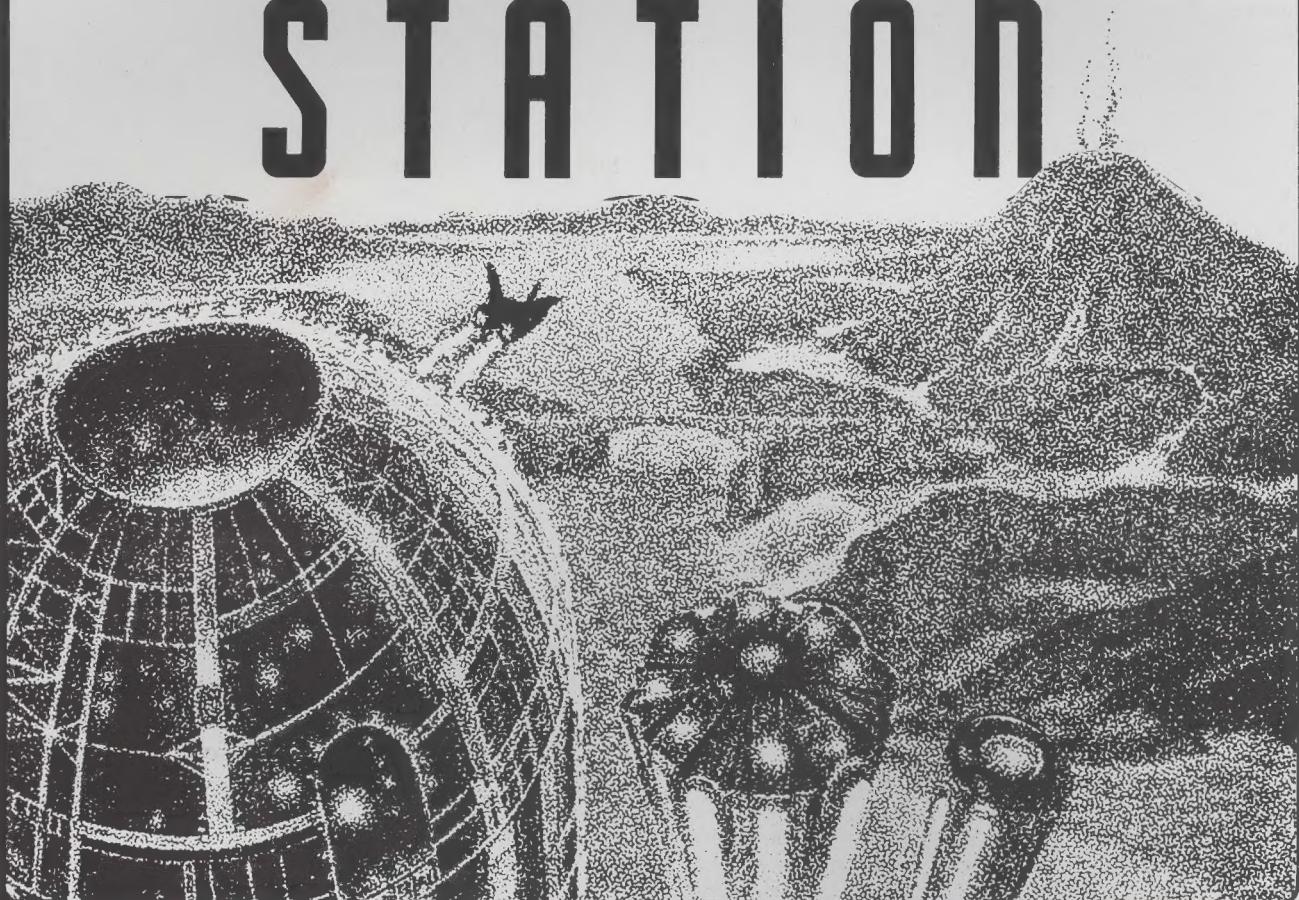
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# interzone

No 23 Spring 1988

## EDITORIAL

The purpose of Interzone is to publish new short stories by science-fiction and fantasy writers. That has been our *raison d'être* for six years now, and it will always remain so. Since our third issue we've also published illustrations (and occasional comic strips), and in the past two-and-a-half years we've added several non-fiction features: author interviews, film reviews and a greatly expanded book-review section. All this has been in addition to an increase in the wordage of fiction which we print, for the magazine is now more than twice its original size. With the present issue we introduce another new feature — the first of a series of "letters from America" by the expatriate British sf writer Charles Platt (his first column takes the form of an unorthodox tribute to Alfred Bester, who died on 30th September 1987).

We're certain that our enhanced non-fiction content has helped increase Interzone's popularity (for now we have double the number of subscribers that we had in 1985) but lately there have been a few complaints from readers — in particular, complaints about the book reviews. Stuart Falconer wrote in last issue's letter column that "far too much space is being devoted to this secondary activity" of book reviewing. Since then another correspondent, Nicholas Mahoney, has said: "you spend too much space on reviews when such institutions as Foundation and the British Science Fiction Association deal so comprehensively with that department." And Lyle Hopwood has written to say: "I don't like the book reviews! It's not the impartiality or otherwise, but the space they take up... Every book and more is dealt with in detail in the BSFA's stuff."

But we're strongly of the opinion that *Interzone* should publish extensive book reviews. North East London Polytechnic's critical journal, *Foundation*, and the BSFA's magazine, *Vector*, each have a readership of about one thousand people. Our circulation is several times larger, and growing rapidly. Presuming that they don't read the small specialist journals, where else can the majority of our British readers look for reviews of new sf books? Despite a boom in sf and fantasy publishing, the British daily and Sunday press ignores these forms of writing. A few weeks before Christmas, the *Sunday Times* and the *Observer* each published a thick supplement of book reviews, but neither contained any mention of sf. The *Guardian*'s erstwhile reviewer of science fiction, Tom Shippey, has left the country and (at the end of 1987) has not been replaced. These days, only the *Times* publishes an occasional sf column (by Tom Hutchinson) — and it is scarcely enough.

It seems the ghetto walls have been rebuilt, and they're stronger than ever. That wider appreciation of sf as a valid form of modern literature, which was almost taken for granted ten or twenty years ago, has now largely vanished (another achievement of the 1960s which has been "rolled back" in these conservative times). Not only is sf ignored, but some fine authors are damned by association: I have yet to see a review in any of the general newspapers of Gene Wolfe's excellent *The Urth of the New Sun* or John Crowley's brilliant (non-sf) *Aegupt*. (Both were published by Gollancz in September 1987 at £11.95). *Interzone* cannot hope to cover everything in the field, but we do feel that it is our task to speak up for science fiction and fantasy. This we shall continue to do — and we intend to go bimonthly in the summer of 1988, which means (among other things) that our book reviews will be more timely. — David Pringle

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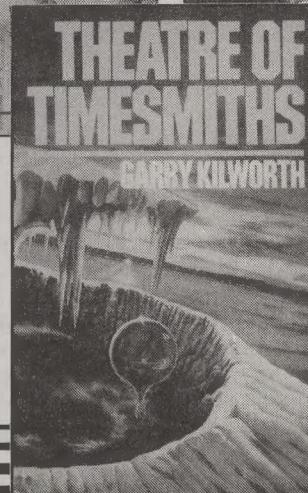
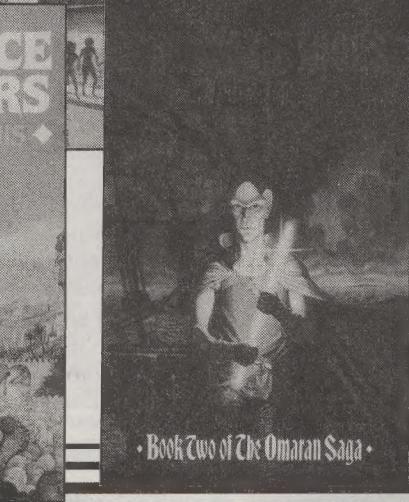
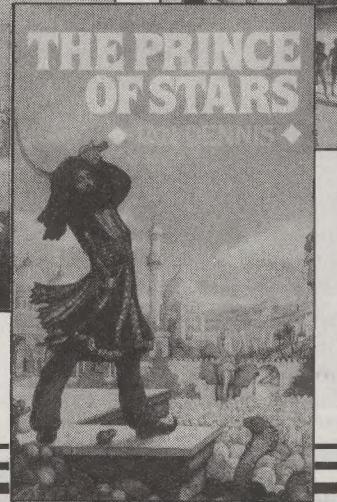
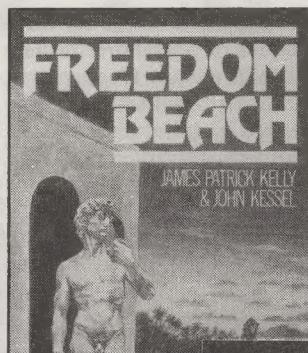
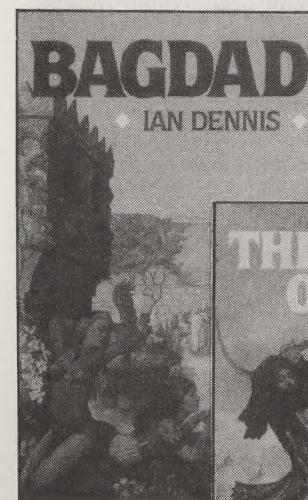
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# David Brin

## The Giving Plague

**Y**ou think you're going to get me, don't you? Well, you've got another think coming, 'cause I'm ready for you.

That's why there's a forged card in my wallet saying my blood group is AB Negative, and a MedicAlert tag warning that I'm allergic to penicillin, aspirin, and phenylalanine. Another one states that I'm a practising, devout Christian Scientist. All these tricks ought to slow you down when the time comes, as it's sure to, sometime soon.

Even if it makes the difference between living and dying, there's just no way I'll let anyone stick a transfusion needle into my arm. Never. Not with the blood supply in the state it's in.

And anyway, I've got antibodies. So you just stay the hell away from me, ALAS. I won't be your patsy. I won't be your vector.

I know your weaknesses, you see. You're a fragile, if subtle devil. Unlike TARP, you can't bear exposure to air or heat or cold or acid or alkali. Blood-to-blood, that's your only route. And what need had you of any other? You thought you'd evolved the perfect technique, didn't you?

What was it Leslie Adgeson called you? "The perfect master? The paragon of viruses?"

I remember long ago when HIV, the AIDS virus, had everyone so impressed with its subtlety and effectiveness of design. But compared with you, HIV is just a crude butcher, isn't it? A maniac with a chainsaw, a blunderer that kills its hosts and relies for transmission on habits humans can, with some effort, get under control. Oh, old HIV had its tricks, but compared with you? An amateur!

Rhinoviruses and flu are clever, too. They're profli-gate, and they mutate rapidly. Long ago they learnt how to make their hosts drip and wheeze and sneeze, so the victims spread the misery in all directions. Flu viruses are also a lot smarter than AIDS 'cause they don't generally kill their hosts, just make 'em miserable while they hack and spray and inflict fresh

infections on their neighbours.

Oh, Les Adgeson was always accusing me of anthropomorphizing our subjects. Whenever he came into my part of the lab, and found me cursing some damned intransigent leucophage in rich, Tex-Mex invective, he'd react predictably. I can just picture him now, raising one eyebrow, commenting dryly in his Winchester accent.

"The virus cannot hear you, Forry. It isn't sentient, nor even alive, strictly speaking. It's little more than a packet of genes in a protein case, after all."

"Yeah, Les," I'd answer. "But selfish genes! Given half a chance, they'll take over a human cell, force it to make armies of new viruses, then burst it apart as they escape to attack other cells. They may not think. All that behaviour may have evolved by blind chance. But doesn't it all feel as if it was planned? As if the nasty little things were guided, somehow, by somebody out to make us miserable...? Out to make us die?"

"Oh, come now Forry," he would smile at my New World ingenuousness. "You wouldn't be in this field if you didn't find phages beautiful, in their own way."

Good old, smug, sanctimonious Les. He never did figure out that viruses fascinated me for quite another reason. In their rapacious insatiability I saw a simple, distilled purity of ambition that exceeded even my own. The fact that it was mindless did little to ease my mind. I've always imagined we humans over-rated brains, anyway.

**W**e'd first met when Les visited Austin on sabbatical, some years before. He'd had the Boy Genius rep even then, and naturally I played up to him. He invited me to join him back in Oxford, so there I was, having regular amiable arguments over the meaning of disease while the English rain dripped desultorily on the rhododendrons outside.

Les Adgeson. Him with his artsy friends and his

pretensions at philosophy – Les was all the time talking about the elegance and beauty of our nasty little subjects. But he didn't fool me. I knew he was just as crazy Nobel-mad as the rest of us. Just as obsessed with the chase, searching for that piece of the Life Puzzle, that bit leading to more grants, more lab space, more techs, more prestige...leading to money, status and, maybe eventually, Stockholm.

He claimed not to be interested in such things. But he was a smoothy, all right. How else, in the midst of the Thatcher massacre of British science, did his lab keep expanding? And yet, he kept up the pretence.

"Viruses have their good side," Les kept saying. "Sure, they often kill, in the beginning. All new pathogens start that way. But eventually, one of two things happens. Either humanity evolves defences to eliminate the threat or..."

Oh, he loved those dramatic pauses.

"Or?" I'd prompt him, as required.

"Or we come to an accommodation, a compromise...even an alliance."

That's what Les always talked about. Symbiosis. He loved to quote Margulis and Thomas, and even Lovelock, for pity's sake! His respect even for vicious, sneaky brutes like the HIV was downright scary.

"See how it actually incorporates itself right into the DNA of its victims?" he would muse. "Then it waits, until the victim is later attacked by some other disease pathogen. Then the hosts T-Cells prepare to replicate, to drive off the invader, only now some cells' chemical machinery is taken over by the new DNA, and instead of two new T-Cells, a plethora of new AIDS viruses results."

"So?" I answered. "Except that it's a retrovirus, that's the way nearly all viruses work."

"Yes, but think ahead, Forry. Imagine what's going to happen when, inevitably, the AIDS virus infects someone whose genetic makeup makes him invulnerable!"

"What, you mean his antibody reactions are fast enough to stop it? Or his T-Cells repel invasion?"

Oh, Les used to sound so damn patronizing when he got excited. "No, no, think!" he urged. "I mean invulnerable after infection. After the viral genes have incorporated into his chromosomes. Only in this individual, certain other genes prevent the new DNA from triggering viral synthesis. No new viruses are made. No cellular disruption. The person is invulnerable. But now he has all this new DNA..."

"In just a few cells –"

"Yes. But suppose one of these is a sex cell. Then suppose he fathers a child with that gamete. Now every one of that child's cells may contain both the trait of invulnerability and the new viral genes! Think about it, Forry. You now have a new type of human being! One who cannot be killed by AIDS. And yet he has all the AIDS genes, can make all those strange, marvellous proteins...Oh, most of them will be unexpressed or useless, of course. But now this child's genome, and his descendants', contains more variety..."

I often wondered, when he got carried away, this way. Did he actually believe he was explaining this to me for the first time? Much as the Brits respect American science, they do tend to assume we're slackers when it comes to the philosophical side. But

I'd seen his interest heading in this direction weeks back, and had carefully done some extra reading.

"You mean like the genes responsible for some types of inheritable cancers?" I asked, sarcastically. "There's evidence some oncogenes were originally inserted into the human genome by viruses, just as you suggest. Those who inherit the trait for rheumatoid arthritis may also have gotten their gene that way."

"Exactly. Those viruses themselves may be extinct, but their DNA lives on, in ours!"

"Right. And boy have human beings benefited!"

Oh, how I hated that smug expression he'd get. (It got wiped off his face eventually, didn't it?)

Les picked up a piece of chalk and drew a figure on the blackboard.

HARMLESS → KILLER! → SURVIVABLE ILLNESS → INCONVENIENCE → HARMLESS

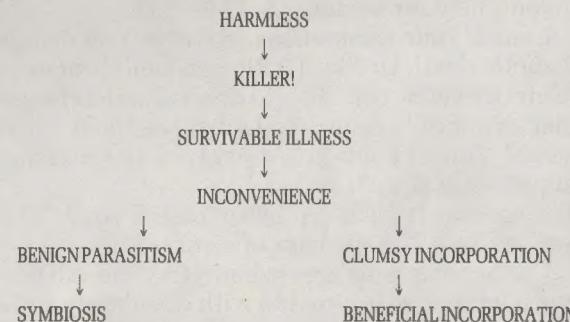
"Here's the classic way of looking at how a host species interacts with a new pathogen, especially a virus. Each arrow, of course, represents a stage of mutation and adaptation selection.

"First, a new form of some previously harmless micro-organism leaps from its prior host, say a monkey species, over to a new one, say us. Of course, at the beginning we have no adequate defences. It cuts through us like syphilis did in Europe in the sixteenth century, killing in days rather than years...in an orgy of cell feeding that's really not a very efficient modus for a pathogen. After all, only a gluttonous parasite kills off its host so quickly.

"What follows, then, is a rough period for both host and parasite as each struggles to adapt to the other. It can be likened to warfare. Or, on the other hand, it might be thought of as a sort of drawn out process of negotiation."

I snorted in disgust. "Mystical crap, Les. I'll concede your chart; but the war analogy is the right one. That's why they fund labs like this one. To come up with better weapons for our side."

"Hmm. Possibly. But sometimes the process does look different, Forry." He turned and drew another chart.



"You can see that this chart is the same as the other, right up to the point where the original disease disappears."

"Or goes into hiding."

"Surely. As e coli took refuge in our innards. Doubtless long ago the ancestors of e coli killed a great many of our ancestors before eventually becoming the beneficial symbionts they are now, helping us digest our food."

"The same applies to viruses, I'd wager. Heritable cancers and rheumatoid arthritis are just temporary awkwardnesses. Eventually, those genes will be comfortably incorporated. They'll be part of the genetic

diversity that prepares us to meet challenges ahead.

"Why, I'd wager a large portion of our present genes came about in such a way, entering our cells first as invaders..."

**C**razy sonovabitch. Fortunately he didn't try to lead the lab's research effort too far to the right on his magic diagram. Our Boy Genius was plenty savvy about the funding agencies. He knew they weren't interested in paying us to prove we're all partly descended from viruses. They wanted, and wanted badly, progress on ways to fight viral infections themselves.

So Les concentrated his team on vectors.

Yeah, you viruses need vectors, don't you? I mean, if you kill a guy, you've got to have a liferaft, so you can desert the ship you've sunk, so you can cross over to some new hapless victim. Same applies if the host proves tough, and fights you off – gotta move on. Always movin' on.

Hell, even if you've made peace with a human body, like Les suggested, you still want to spread, don't you? Bigtime colonizers, you tiny beasties.

Oh, I know. It's just natural selection. Those bugs that accidentally find a good vector spread. Those that don't, don't. But it's so eerie. Sometimes it sure feels purposeful...

So the flu makes us sneeze. Typhus gives us diarrhoea. Smallpox causes pustules which dry, flake off and blow away to be inhaled by the patient's loved ones. All good ways to jump ship. To colonize.

Who knows? Did some past virus cause a swelling of the lips that made us want to kiss? Heh. Maybe that's a case of Les's "benign incorporation"...we retain the trait, long after the causative pathogen went extinct! What a concept.

So our lab got this big grant to study vectors. Which is how Les found you, ALAS. He drew this big chart covering all the possible ways an infection might leap from person to person, and set us about checking all of them, one by one.

For himself he reserved straight blood-to-blood infection. There were reasons for that.

First off, Les was an altruist, see. He was concerned about all the panic and unfounded rumours spreading about Britain's blood supply. Some people were putting off necessary surgery. There was talk of starting over here what some rich folk in the States had begun doing – stockpiling their own blood in silly, expensive efforts to avoid having to use the blood banks if they ever needed hospitalization.

All that bothered Les. But even worse was the fact that lots of potential donors were shying away from giving blood because of some stupid rumours that you could get infected that way.

Hell, nobody ever caught anything from giving blood...nothing except maybe a little dizziness and perhaps a zit or spot from all the biscuits and sweet tea they feed you afterwards. And as for contracting HIV from receiving blood, well, the new antibodies tests soon had that problem under control. Still, the stupid rumours spread.

A nation has to have confidence in its blood supply. Les wanted to eliminate all those silly fears once and for all, with one definitive study. But that wasn't the only reason he wanted the blood-to-blood vector for

himself.

"Sure, there were some nasty things like AIDS that use that vector. But that's also where I might find the older ones," he said, excitedly. "The viruses that have almost finished the process of becoming benign. The ones that have been so well selected that they keep a low profile, and hardly inconvenience their hosts at all. Maybe I can even find one that's commensal! One that actually helps the human body."

"An undiscovered human commensal," I sniffed doubtfully.

"And why not? If there's no visible disease, why would anyone have ever looked for it! This could open up a whole new field, Forry!"

In spite of myself, I was impressed. It was how he got to be known as a Boy Genius, after all, this flash of half-crazy insight. How he managed not to have it snuffed out of him at Oxbridge, I'll never know, but it was one reason why I'd attached myself to him and his lab, and wrangled mighty hard to get my name attached to his papers.

So I kept watch over his work. It sounded so dubious, so damn stupid. And I knew it just might bear fruit, in the end.

That's why I was ready when Les invited me along to a conference down in Bloomsbury, one day. The colloquium itself was routine, but I could tell he was near to bursting with news. Afterwards we walked down Charing Cross Road to a pizza place, one far enough from the University area to be sure there'd be no colleagues anywhere within earshot – just the pre-theatre crowd, waiting till opening time down at Leicester Square.

Les breathlessly swore me to secrecy. He needed a confidant, you see, and I was only too happy to comply.

**“I**'ve been interviewing a lot of blood donors lately," he told me after we'd ordered. "It seems that while some people have been scared off from donating, that has been largely made up by increased contributions by a central core of regulars."

"Sounds good," I said. And I meant it. I had no objection to there being an adequate blood supply. Back in Austin I was pleased to see others go to the Red Cross van, just so long as nobody asked me to contribute. I had neither the time nor the interest, so I got out of it by telling everybody I'd had malaria.

"I found one interesting fellow, Forry. Seems he started donating back when he was twenty-five, during the Blitz. Must have contributed thirty-five, forty gallons, by now."

I did a quick mental calculation. "Wait a minute. He's got to be past the age limit by now."

"Exactly right! He admitted the truth, when he was assured of confidentiality. Seems he didn't want to stop donating when he reached sixty-five. He's a hardy old fellow...had a spot of surgery a few years back, but he's in quite decent shape, over all. So, right after his local Gallon Club threw a big retirement party for him, he actually moved across the county and registered at a new blood bank, giving a false name and a younger age!"

"Kinky. But it sounds harmless enough. I'd guess he just likes to feel needed. Bet he flirts with the

nurses and enjoys the free food...sort of a bi-monthly party he can always count on, with friendly appreciative people."

Hey, just because I'm a selfish bastard doesn't mean I can't extrapolate the behaviour of altruists. Like most other user-types, I've got a good instinct for the sort of motivations that drive suckers. People like me need to know such things.

"That's what I thought too, at first," Les said, nodding. "I found a few more like him, and decided to call them 'addicts'. At first I never connected them with the other group, the one I named 'converts'."

"Converts?"

"Yes, converts. People who suddenly become blood donors – get this – very soon after they've recovered from surgery themselves!"

"Maybe they're paying off part of their hospital bills that way?"

"Mmm, not really. We have nationalized health, remember? And even for private patients, that might account for the first few donations only."

"Gratitude, then?" An alien emotion to me, but I understood it, in principle.

"Perhaps. Some few people might have their consciousness raised after a close brush with death, and decide to become better citizens. After all, half an hour at a blood bank, a few times a year, is a small inconvenience in exchange for..."

Sanctimonious twit. Of course he was a donor. Les went on and on about civic duty and such until the waitress arrived with our pizza and two fresh bitters. That shut him up for a moment. But when she left, he leaned forward, eyes shining.

"But no, Forry. It wasn't bill-paying, or even gratitude. Not for some of them, at least. More had happened to these people than having their consciousness raised. They were converts, Forry. They began joining Gallon Clubs, and more! It seems almost as if, in each case, a personality change had taken place."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that a significant fraction of those who have had major surgery during the last five years seem to have changed their entire set of social attitudes! Beyond becoming blood donors, they've increased their contributions to charity, joined the Parent-Teacher organizations and Boy Scout troops, become active in Greenpeace and Save The Children..."

"The point, Les. What's your point?"

"My point?" He shook his head. "Frankly, some of these people were behaving like addicts...like converted addicts to altruism. That's when it occurred to me, Forry, that what we might have here was a new vector."

He said it as simply as that. Naturally I looked at him blankly.

"A vector!" he whispered, urgently. "Forget about typhus, or smallpox, or flu. They're rank amateurs! Wallies who give the show away with all their sneezing and flaking and shitting. To be sure, AIDS uses blood and sex, but it's so damned savage, it forced us to become aware of it, to develop tests, to begin the long, slow process of isolating it. But ALAS –"

"Alas?"

"A-L-A-S." He grinned. "It's what I've named the new virus I've isolated, Forry. It stands for 'Acquired Lavish Altruism Syndrome.' How do you like it?"

"Hate it. Are you trying to tell me that there's a virus that affects the human mind? And in such a complicated way?" I was incredulous and, at the same time, scared spitless. I've always had this superstitious feeling about viruses and vectors. Les really had me spooked now.

"No, of course not," he laughed. "But consider a simpler possibility. What if some virus one day stumbled on a way to make people enjoy giving blood?"

I guess I only blinked then, unable to give him any other reaction.

"Think, Forry! Think about that old man I spoke of earlier. He told me that every two months or so, just before he'd be allowed to donate again, he tends to feel 'all thick inside'. The discomfort only goes away after the next donation!"

I blinked again. "And you're saying that each time he gives blood, he's actually serving his parasite, providing it a vector into new hosts..."

"The new hosts being those who survive surgery because the hospital gave them fresh blood, all because our old man was so generous, yes! They're infected! Only this is a subtle virus, not a greedy bastard, like AIDS, or even the flu. It keeps a low profile. Who knows, maybe it's even reached a level of commensalism with its hosts – attacking invading organisms for them, or..."

He saw the look on my face and waved his hands. "All right, far fetched, I know. But think about it! Because there are no disease symptoms, nobody has ever looked for this virus, until now."

**H**e's isolated it, I realized, suddenly. And, knowing instantly what this thing could mean, career-wise, I was already scheming, wondering how to get my name onto his paper, when he published this. So absorbed was I that, for a few moments, I lost track of his words.

"...And so now we get to the interesting part. You see, what's a normal, selfish Tory-voter going to think when he finds himself suddenly wanting to go down to the blood bank as often as they'll let him?"

"Um," I shook my head. "That he's been bewitched? Hypnotized?"

"Nonsense!" Les snorted. "That's not how human psychology works. No, we tend to do lots of things without knowing why. We need excuses, though, so we rationalize! If an obvious reason for our behaviour isn't readily available, we invent one, preferably one that helps us think better of ourselves. Ego is powerful stuff, my friend."

Hey, I thought. Don't teach your grandmother to suck eggs.

"Altruism," I said aloud. "They find themselves rushing regularly to the blood bank. So they rationalize that it's because they're good people... They become proud of it. Brag about it..."

"You've got it," Les said. "And because they're proud, even sanctimonious about their newfound generosity, they tend to extend it, to bring it into other parts of their lives!"

I whispered in hushed awe. "An altruism virus! Jesus, Les, when we announce this..."

I stopped when I saw his sudden frown, and instantly thought it was because I'd used that word, "we." I should have known better, of course. For Les

was always more than willing to share the credit. No, his reservation was far more serious than that.

"Not yet, Forry. We can't publish this yet."

I shook my head. "Why not! This is big, Les! It proves much of what you've been saying all along, about symbiosis and all that. There could even be a Nobel in it!"

I'd been gauche, and spoken aloud of The Ultimate. But he did not even seem to notice. Damn. If only Les had been like most biologists, driven more than anything else by the lure of Stockholm. But no. You see, Les was a natural. A natural altruist.

It was his fault, you see. Him and his damn virtue, they drove me to first contemplate what I next decided to do.

"Don't you see, Forry? If we publish, they'll develop an antibody test for the ALAS virus. Donors carrying it will be barred from the blood banks, just like those carrying AIDS and syphilis and hepatitis. And that would be incredibly cruel torture to those poor addicts and carriers."

"Screw the carriers!" I almost shouted. Several pizza patrons glanced my way. With a desperate effort I brought my voice down. "Look, Les, the carriers will be classified as diseased, won't they? So they'll go under doctor's care. And if all it takes to make them feel better is to bleed them regularly, well, then we'll give them pet leeches!"

Les smiled. "Clever. But that's not the only, or even my main reason, Forry. No, I'm not going to publish, yet, and that is final. I just can't allow anybody to stop this disease. It's got to spread, to become an epidemic. A pandemic."

I stared, and upon seeing that look in his eyes, I knew that Les was more than an altruist. He had caught that specially insidious of all human ailments, the Messiah Complex. Les wanted to save the world.

"Don't you see?" he said urgently, with the fervour of a proselyte. "Selfishness and greed are destroying the planet, Forry! But nature always finds a way, and this time symbiosis may be giving us our last chance, a final opportunity to become better people, to learn to cooperate before it's too late!

"The things we're most proud of, our prefrontal lobes, those bits of grey matter above the eyes which make us so much smarter than beasts, what good have they done us, Forry? Not a hell of a lot. We aren't going to think our way out of the crises of the 20th century. Or, at least, thought alone won't do it. We need something else, as well.

"And Forry, I'm convinced that something else is ALAS. We've got to keep this secret, at least until it's so well established in the population that there's no turning back!"

I swallowed. "How long? How long do you want to wait? Until it starts affecting voting patterns? Until after the next election?"

He shrugged. "Oh, at least that long. Five years. Possibly seven. You see, the virus tends to only get into people who've recently had surgery, and they're generally older. Fortunately, they also are often influential. Just the sort who now vote Tory..."

He went on. And on. I listened with half an ear, but already I had come to that fateful realization. A seven year wait for a goddamn co-authorship would make this discovery next to useless to my career, to my

ambitions.

Of course I could blow the secret on Les, now that I knew of it. But that would only embitter him, and he'd easily take all the credit for the discovery anyway. People tend to remember innovators, not whistle-blowers.

We paid our bill and walked toward Charing Cross Station, where we could catch the tube to Paddington, and from there to Oxford. Along the way we ducked out of a sudden downpour at a streetside ice cream vendor. While we waited, I bought us both cones. I remember quite clearly that he had strawberry, I had a raspberry ice.

While Les absent-mindedly talked on about his research plans, a small pink smudge coloured the corner of his mouth. I pretended to listen, but already my mind had turned to other things, nascent plans and earnest scenarios for committing murder.

**I**t would be the perfect crime, of course.

Those movie detectives are always going on about "motive, means, and opportunity." Well, motive I had in plenty, but it was a one so far-fetched, so obscure, that it would surely never occur to anybody.

Means? Hell, I worked in a business rife with means. There were poisons and pathogens galore. We're a very careful profession, but, well, accidents do happen... The same holds for opportunity.

There was a rub, of course. Such was Boy Genius's reputation that, even if I did succeed in knobbling him, I didn't dare come out immediately with my own announcement. Damn him, everyone would just assume it was his work anyway, or his "leadership" here at the lab, at least, that led to the discovery of ALAS. And besides, too much fame for me right after his demise might lead someone to suspect a motive.

So, I realized, Les was going to get his delay, after all. Maybe not seven years, but three or four perhaps, during which I'd move back to the States, start a separate line of work, then subtly guide my own research to cover methodically all the bases Les had so recently flown over in flashes of inspiration. I wasn't happy about the delay, but at the end of that time, it would look entirely like my own work. No co-authorship for Forry on this one, nossir!

The beauty of it was that nobody would ever think of connecting me with the tragic death of my colleague and friend, years before. After all, did not his demise set me back in my career, temporarily? "Ah, if only poor Les had lived to see your success!" my competitors would say, suppressing jealous bile as they watched me pack for Stockholm.

Of course none of this appeared on my face or in my words. We both had our normal work to do. But almost every day I also put in long extra hours helping Les in "our" secret project. In its own way it was an exhilarating time, and Les was lavish in his praise of the slow, dull, but methodical way I fleshed out some of his ideas.

I made my arrangements slowly, knowing Les was in no hurry. Together we gathered data. We isolated, and even crystallized the virus, got X-Ray diffractions, did epidemiological studies, all in strictest secrecy.

"Amazing!" Les would cry out, as he uncovered the

way the ALAS virus forced its hosts to feel their need to "give". He'd wax eloquent, effusive over elegant mechanisms which he ascribed to random selection but which I could not help superstitiously attributing to some incredibly insidious form of intelligence. The more subtle and effective we found its techniques to be, the more admiring Les became, and the more I found myself loathing those little packets of RNA and protein.

The fact that the virus seemed so harmless – Les thought even commensal – only made me hate it more. It made me glad of what I had planned. Glad that I was going to stymie Les in his scheme to give ALAS free rein.

I was going to save humanity from this would-be puppet master. True, I'd delay my warning to suit my own purposes, but the warning would come, nonetheless, and sooner than my unsuspecting compatriot planned.

Little did Les know that he was doing background for work I'd take credit for. Every flash of insight, his every "Eureka!", was stored away in my private notebook, beside my own columns of boring data. Meanwhile, I sorted through all the means at my disposal.

Finally, I selected for my agent a particularly virulent strain of Dengue Fever.

**T**here's an old saying we have in Texas. "A chicken is just an egg's way of makin' more eggs."

To a biologist, familiar with all those latinized-graeccified words, this saying has a much more "posh" version. Humans are "zygotes", made up of diploid cells containing 46 paired chromosomes... except for our haploid sex cells, or "gametes". Males' gametes are sperm and females' are eggs, each containing only 23 chromosomes.

So biologists say that "a zygote is only a gamete's way of making more gametes."

Clever, eh? But it does point out just how hard it is, in nature, to pin down a Primal Cause...some centre to the puzzle, against which everything else can be calibrated. I mean, which does come first, the chicken or the egg?

"Man is the measure of all things," goes another wise old saying. Oh yeah! Tell that to a modern feminist.

A guy I once knew, who used to read science fiction, told me about this story he'd seen, in which it turned out that the whole and entire purpose of humanity, brains and all, was to be the organism that built starships so that house flies could migrate out and colonize the galaxy.

But that idea's nothing compared with what Les Adgeson believed. He spoke of the human animal as if he were describing a veritable United Nations. From the *e coli* in our guts, to tiny commensal mites that clean our eyelashes for us, to the mitochondria that energize our cells, all the way to the contents of our very DNA...Les saw it all as a great big hive of compromise, negotiation, symbiosis. Most of the contents of our chromosomes came from past invaders, he contended.

Symbiosis? The picture he created in my mind was one of minuscule puppteers, all yanking and jerking

at us with their protein strings, making us marionettes dance to their own tunes, to their own nasty, selfish little agendas.

And you, you were the worst! Like most cynics, I had always maintained a secret faith in human nature. Yes, most people are pigs. I've always known that. And while I may be a user, at least I'm honest enough to admit it.

But deep down, we users count on the sappy, inexplicable generosity, the mysterious, puzzling altruism of those others, the kind, inexplicably decent folk...those we superficially sneer at in contempt, but secretly hold in awe.

Then you came along, damn you. You make people behave that way. There is no mystery left, after you get finished. No corner remaining impenetrable to cynicism. Damn, how I came to hate you!

As I came to hate Leslie Adgeson. I made my plans, schemed my brilliant campaign against both of you. In those last days of innocence I felt oh, so savagely determined. So deliciously decisive and in control of my own destiny.

In the end it was anticlimactic. I didn't have time to finish my preparations, to arrange that little trap, that sharp bit of glass dipped in just the right mixture of deadly micro-organisms. For CAPUC arrived then, just before I could exercise my option as a murderer.

CAPUC changed everything.

Catastrophic Auto-immune PULmonary Collapse... acronym for the horror that made AIDS look like a minor irritant. And in the beginning it appeared unstoppable. Its vectors were completely unknown and the causative agent defied isolation for so long.

This time it was no easily identifiable group that came down with the new plague, though it concentrated upon the industrialized world. Schoolchildren in some areas seemed particularly vulnerable. In other places it was secretaries and postal workers.

Naturally, all the major epidemiology labs got involved. Les predicted the pathogen would turn out to be something akin to the prions which cause shingles in sheep, and certain plant diseases...a pseudo life form even simpler than a virus and even harder to track down. It was a heretical, minority view, until the CDC in Atlanta decided out of desperation to try his theories out, and found the very dormant viroids Les predicted – mixed in with the glue used to seal paper milk cartons, envelopes, postage stamps.

Les was a hero, of course. Most of us in the labs were. After all, we'd been the first line of defence. Our own casualty rate had been ghastly.

For a while there, funerals and other public gatherings were discouraged. But an exception was made for Les. The procession behind his cortège was a mile long. I was asked to deliver the eulogy. And when they pleaded with me to take over at the lab, I agreed.

So naturally I tended to forget all about ALAS. The war against CAPUC took everything society had. And while I may be selfish, even a rat can tell when it makes more sense to join in the fight to save a sinking ship...especially when there's no other port in sight.

We learned how to combat CAPUC, eventually. It involved drugs, and a vaccine based on reversed antibodies force-grown in the patient's own marrow after he's given a dangerous overdose of a Vanadium compound I found by trial and error. It worked, most

of the time, but the victims suffered great stress and often required a special regime of whole blood transfusions to get across the most dangerous phase.

Blood banks were stretched even thinner than before. Only now the public responded generously, as in time of war. I should not have been surprised when survivors, after their recovery, volunteered by their thousands. But, of course, I'd forgotten about ALAS by then, hadn't I?

**W**e beat back CAPUC. Its vector proved too unreliable, too easily interrupted once we'd figured it out. The poor little viroid never had a chance to get to Les's "negotiation" stage. Oh well, those are the breaks.

I got all sorts of citations I didn't deserve. The King gave me a KBE for personally saving the Prince of Wales. I had dinner at the White House.

Big deal.

The world had a respite, after that. CAPUC had scared people, it seemed, into a new spirit of cooperation. I should have been suspicious, of course. But soon I'd moved over to WHO, and had all sorts of administrative responsibilities in the Final Campaign on Malnutrition.

By that time, I had almost entirely forgotten about ALAS.

I forgot about you, didn't I? Oh, the years passed, my star rose, I became famous, respected, revered. I didn't get my Nobel in Stockholm. Ironically, I picked it up in Oslo. Fancy that. Just shows you can fool anybody.

And yet, I don't think I ever really forgot about you, ALAS, not at the back of my mind.

Peace treaties were signed. Citizens of the industrial nations voted temporary cuts in their standards of living in order to fight poverty and save the environment. Suddenly, it seemed, we'd all grown up. Other cynics, guys I'd gotten drunk with in the past – and shared dark premonitions about the inevitable fate of filthy, miserable humanity – all gradually deserted the faith, as pessimists seem wont to do when the world turns bright – too bright for even the cynical to dismiss as a mere passing phase on the road to Hell.

And yet, my own brooding remained unblemished. For subconsciously I knew it wasn't real.

Then, the third Mars Expedition returned to worldwide adulation, and brought home with them TARP.

And that was when we all found out just how friendly all our home-grown pathogens really had been, all along.

Late at night, stumbling in exhaustion from overwork, I would stop at Les's portrait where I'd ordered it hung in the hall opposite my office door, and stand there cursing him and his damned theories of symbiosis.

Imagine mankind ever reaching a symbiotic association with TARP! That really would be something. Imagine, Les, all those alien genes, added to our heritage, to our rich human diversity!

Only TARP did not seem to be much interested in "negotiation". Its wooing was rough, deadly. And its vector was the wind.

The world looked to me, and to my peers, for salvation. In spite of all of my successes and high renown, though, I knew myself for a second-best fraud. I would always know – no matter how much they thanked

and praised me – who had been better than me by light-years.

Again and again, deep into the night, I would pore through the notes Leslie Adgeson had left behind, seeking inspiration, seeking hope. That's when I stumbled across ALAS, again.

I found you again.

Oh, you made us behave better, all right. At least a quarter of the human race must contain your DNA, by now, ALAS. And in their newfound, inexplicable, rationalized altruism, they set the tone followed by all the others.

Everybody behaves so damned well in the present calamity. They help each other, they succour the sick, they all give so.

Funny thing, though. If you hadn't made us all so bloody cooperative, we'd probably never have made it to bloody Mars, would we? Or if we had, there'd have still been enough paranoia around so we'd have maintained a decent quarantine.

But then, I remind myself, you don't plan, do you? You're just a bundle of RNA, packed inside a protein coat, with an incidentally, accidentally acquired trait of making humans want to donate blood. That's all you are, right? So you had no way of knowing that by making us "better" you were also setting us up for TARP, did you? Did you?

**W**e've got some palliatives, now. A few new techniques seem to be doing some good.

The latest news is great, in fact. Apparently, we'll be able to save maybe fifteen percent or so of the children. At least half of them may even be fertile.

That's for nations who've had a lot of racial mixing. Heterozygosity and genetic diversity seem to breed better resistance. Those peoples with "pure", narrow bloodlines will be harder to save, but then, racism has its inevitable price.

Too bad about the great apes and horses, but then, at least all this will give the rain forests a chance to grow back.

Meanwhile, everybody perseveres. There is no panic, as one reads about happening in past plagues. We've grown up at last, it seems. We help each other.

But I carry a card in my wallet saying I'm a Christian Scientist, and that my blood group is AB Negative, and that I'm allergic to nearly everything. Transfusions are one of the treatments commonly used now, and I'm an important man. But I won't take blood. I won't. I don't, but I'll never take it. Not even when I drop.

You won't have me, ALAS. You won't.

I am a bad man. I suppose, all told, I've done more good than evil in my life, but that's incidental, a product of happenstance and the caprices of the world.

I have no control over the world, but I can make my own decisions, at least. As I make this one, now.

Down, out of my high research tower I've gone. Into the streets, where the teeming clinics fester and broil. That's where I work now. And it doesn't matter to me that I'm behaving no differently than anyone else today. They are all marionettes. They think they're acting altruistically, but I know they are your puppets, ALAS.

But I am a man, do you hear me? I make my own decisions.

Fever wracks my body now, as I drag myself from

bed to bed, holding their hands when they stretch them out to me for comfort, doing what I can to ease their suffering, to save a few.

You'll not have me, ALAS.

This is what I choose to do.

"The Giving Plague," copyright © 1988, David Brin

**David Brin** (born 1950), author of the foregoing story, wishes it to be known that he is a member in good standing of his local "Gallon Club," and finds donating a very rewarding experience. An engineer, space consultant and physics teacher, he is a native of California, although he recently spent a year in Britain: "It's been incredible living in the UK. I've learned a lot." His books include *Sundiver* (1980), the Hugo and Nebula Award-winning *Startide Rising* (1983), *The Postman* (1985), *The River of Time* (1986) and *The Uplift War* (1987). This is his first appearance in *Interzone*.

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# Paul J. McAuley

## Karl and the Ogre

The three hunters, Karl and Shem and Anaxander, picked up the ogre's trail only a day after they had left the village and begun to follow the river back along its course to the spot where the unicorn had been killed, deep in the folded foothills of the Berkshires. Steeply sloping woods cluttered with ferns and mossy boulders. Slim trees, beech and sugar maple, leaning every which way in hot green light. June, the sky a blank blue. They'd gone down to the water to refill their bottles, and there, in a little embayment between white boulders tumbled by snowmelt floods, Karl found the ogre's bootprints in wet gravel at the river's edge.

A gangling blond lad of twenty summers, Karl wiped sweat from his eyes as he stared down at the prints – flat, intagliated with the waffle pattern of oldtime shoes – and felt no elation. After a moment he called over the others.

Anaxander nervously shook black, elflocked hair from his eyes and barely glanced at the prints before dancing away, trailing a high happy babble, ulu-lulu-la-la, then spinning around and cocking his head to listen to the trill of some bird in the woods that rose above the river. Meanwhile, Shem put his hands on the knees of his jeans and puzzled over the sign: poor, slow, patient Shem. He'd been the best hunter of all, Karl's mother had said, before the transgression which had brought down the changelings' anger. They had broken the edge of his intelligence then, leaving only a dog's dull unquestioning loyalty. Karl had never learnt what Shem had done; none of the hunters like to talk about it, not even his often outspoken mother – and now she was gone, sent by the grim changeling who had charge of the hunters' guild to track down the last of the ogres in the rainy forests of the North Pacific coast.

Karl said impatiently, "Not such a big one this time. My weight or maybe a little less."

"...Maybe," Shem said at last, and straightened, squinting against the sundazzle that salted the swift-

running river. Sweat shone on the dappled horseshoe of baldness that pushed into his red hair. He said, "Let it be clean this time, boy. None of the talk. Just do it."

"Talking about the oldtime doesn't harm," Karl said, smiling, sure in his power over the older man.

"...Maybe. I don't know, boy."

Karl swatted at a mosquito. "There's an undine in this river, right? Worth calling up, I guess."

"I guess," Shem said, while Anaxander pulled the little wooden pipe from his belt and trilled the notes of the birdsong he'd just heard.

Squatting in hot sunlight, Karl laboriously scratched the necessary signs on a heavy granite pebble with his bodkin, then straightened and lobbed the stone out into the central current. Immediately, the glass-green water there boiled in white foam. An arm as long as Karl was tall broke surface, huge hand spread to show the membranes looped between the fingers; and each finger tipped with a claw curved like the thorn of a rose. Then her inhuman face, hair tangled like waterweed about it; then her shoulders and breasts, as smooth and white as the boulders of the shore. Water spraying from the gill-slits in her neck, the undine sculled in the current, turning to face the hunters.

But she had little to tell them. Yes, she said in answer to Karl's questions, yes, the ogre had drunk the water of the river that morning, just after dawn. And yes, there had been only one creature. But when it had drunk its fill, it had turned and gone up the hillside, and the undine knew no more of it. Karl thanked her and she sank back, hair floating out from her face as water closed over it and she dissolved into her element. Then there was only the sound of the river and the high piping of the birds in the green woods.

"Come on," Karl said, picking up his blanket-roll. "There are bound to be tracks through the undergrowth up there – the dirt's so wet you can kick a spring out of it with your heel. What is it, Ax?"

Anaxander was pointing across the river. Karl shaded his eyes and saw a deer step daintily over a spit of gravel, then lower its head and drink.

"I see it," Karl said, "but it's on the wrong side. I could put an arrow in it, sure, but I'm not swimming across to get it, and none of us can walk on water. Or can you, Ax, huh?"

Shem said hoarsely and urgently, "They said it was not allowed to kill anything but the ogre. You remember, boy, remember the cow. Ready for us when we return. Not allowed, here."

The placid Jersey cow, her long-lashed eyes looking trustingly at the village slaughterer as he placed a hand on her white muzzle. Her abrupt sideways collapse. Karl said bitterly, "You'd think we'd be free of their damned rules up here!"

Shem shrugged; Anaxander piped a fragment of the tune which the girl had sung. Karl reddened and plunged his fists into the pockets of his long cotton coat. No use scolding the idiot, he probably didn't mean anything by it. Although you were never sure, never really sure. Anaxander was an idiot, but he was also a changeling. You never really knew what went on behind those clear blue eyes. "Come on," Karl said, after a moment. "Still a long stretch before sunset. The damn ogre might even have its lair near, huh? So put that pipe away Ax. It might hear."

Shem glanced at Karl, and the boy, his ears beginning to burn, turned and started off up the slope beneath the trees. But as he cast about for signs of the ogre's passage — moss scraped from the ground, a bent twig, a fresh-turned pebble — he could not help remembering the girl. The changeling girl as she had come along the shore of the lake with the basket resting on the swell of one hip, butterflies dancing about her long hair in the sunlight. Karl remembered her with angry helplessness mixed with loathing. No. She was not, never would be, for the likes of him.

**T**hey had arrived at the village, Karl and Shem and Anaxander, around noon two days before, their horses tired and fidgety in the heat. There was a thorn fence twice the height of a man, its barbs as hard and as sharp as tempered iron, and so thick that the gate, barred and bolted, stood at the end of a kind of tunnel. The three hunters had to wait outside until the sun sank to its last quarter before the village began to wake and the kobold which guarded the gate would let them in. Karl, thirsty and with a thick head from sleeping in the heat, followed the shambling gatekeeper with the others, leading their horses over close-cropped turf. Sheep scattered from their path.

The village stood beyond fenced hay meadows, near the shore of a lake that reflected the dark trees encircling it: a huddle of whitewashed stone cottages each in its own garden and thatched with reeds, backed by strips of vegetable gardens and white-fenced paddocks where horses grazed. The three hunters were led away from this to a big barn with a hex-eye painted on one side like a target, which stood next to a rambling single-storey house.

These belonged to the village slaughterer, of course, a gnarled, bird-like man who dismissed the kobold and took charge of the hunters, showing them into the barn and telling them to wait for the village council. The hunters watered and brushed down their

horses; then, while Anaxander and Shem sprawled on clean straw and slept again, Karl sat just inside the barn's big, square door, fretting at the delay even though he should by now have become used to the changelings' disdain.

Beyond the barn, a grassy slope ran down to the edge of the lake. Presently, a girl walked down from the slaughterer's house with a wooden bucket, and Karl watched as she stooped to fill it, and watched her walk back, her soft leather kilt flapping at her plump calves, sunlight shimmering on her cotton jerkin, on her long flowing hair and the scraps of colour which danced about it. Then she was inside the house, the door closed. Karl saw that, further along the shore, the deputation of the village council was making its way towards the barn.

Karl rose and shook the stiffness from his legs, roused Shem and Anaxander. Green eyes shining mischievously, the changeling pranced about the two men, blowing shrill dissonances on his pipe; Karl managed to grab his arm and push him forward into the sunlight just as the villagers halted outside.

At first glance the half dozen men and women were unremarkable, but something about their bearing, a pure, calm certainty, always intimidated Karl, so that he became uncomfortably aware of his shirt sticking to his shoulderblades, the dirt under his fingernails, the rank smell of his own sweat mingled with that of his horse. Their spokesman, a plump man of fifty or so, started off by addressing Anaxander, and when Karl pointed out the error simply shrugged and said to the idiot with solemn courtesy, "I am sorry, brother."

Karl said, "He doesn't understand much of anything except music."

"He understands," one of the women said, eyeing Karl and Shem with displeasure.

And so as usual it began badly, Karl angry yet at the same time more afraid than he cared to admit — for any one of the changelings, however homely their appearance, could have twisted him inside out as easily as snap a pod of peas. At least it was a straightforward task. The spokesman explained that the village had long suspected that at least one ogre survived in the hills beyond the lake, and that suspicion had been confirmed when a freshly killed unicorn had been found there. Karl guessed that the villagers had in fact tolerated the creature for some time; ogres were often the source of a multitude of minor nuisances around changeling villages, either from genuine hatred, or foolishness, or simple bravado, rarely the agent of a single outrage. Easier to ignore such trespasses than cause the kind of upset a hunt involved, raising the guilt of the deaths of all the people of the oldtime: but the murder of a sacred creature could not be ignored.

So he said, "Unicorn, huh? Well now. How long ago was that?"

"Twelve days."

Karl considered, working out the time it had taken to organize this hunt, the time they had taken to ride out here. He said, "Why did you wait two days or more before notifying our guild? The thing could have left the area by now."

"There was, as now, a reshaping. That could not be disturbed." The plump man's gaze was remote and unfathomable, without trace of guilt. As always, Karl

was made to feel that, somehow, he was in the wrong; he fumbled through the rest of the routine, the questions about when and where, and was relieved when the changelings took their leave.

Later, the girl Karl had seen filling her water-bucket came up to the barn, a basket balanced on an outthrust hip: a flagon of cider, a ripe cheese, bread, honey. Karl thanked her, then said impulsively, "Your father is the slaughterer, right? I guess we have something in common."

The girl lowered her gaze, and Karl was able to study her round, pretty face. Her long hair had been braided over one shoulder. A butterfly sat above the swell one of her small breasts made in her cotton jerkin, wings pressed upright like praying hands; others, he noticed, fluttered in the warm shadows of the barn. She said, "You are surely too young to be a hunter. I have heard it said that they are not allowed children."

It was true, of course, and Karl blushed to be reminded of his singular birth. The changelings put something in the food of the Hunter Towns, it was said, or in the water, or in the very air, some oldtime poison that stopped women conceiving. Away from the Hunter Towns the poison wore off, so hunting parties consisted only of men or of women; but sometimes hunting parties would meet in the wilderness, by accident or design. In one of her more drunken moments before she had left for the North Pacific coast, Karl's mother had told him that his father could have been any one of three men: he had hated her for that. Now, he told the girl boastfully, "I've been a hunter five years now, killed eleven ogres." He realized at once that it was the wrong thing to say, and quickly added, "You mustn't be frightened of me. I've come to help your village."

"Oh, I'm not at all afraid of you." Her smile was the merest upcurving of the ends of her delicious lips. How old was she? Fifteen? Sixteen? All of Karl's drinking companions were at least as old as his mother or Shem, as were his few lovers and fewer confidants. He had the briefest fantasy of running off with the girl, finding a place in the wilderness to live as the ogres did. Hunters did that sometimes, and were hunted down like ogres for it. And then Anaxander pranced over, blowing fragments of some remembered melody through his little pipe, and the girl shied.

"Don't worry," Karl said. "He's harmless too, really he is."

"But why is the brother with you?"

"He's one of you, all right, but stupid, you understand? The brain damaged. All he understands is music; any tune he hears he can play right back like one of the oldtime machines."

The girl drew herself up and Karl was suddenly afraid. Her gaze was bright and imperious, like a sudden blade of light in the dim barn. Butterflies swirled around her head like multicoloured flakes of flame. She said, "You must not talk of such things."

"I didn't mean —"

"I must go now."

"I'm sorry," Karl said. "I didn't mean to upset you."

"Really, I must go." Was her gaze softer? "My father and mother must have an early supper. There is a change, this night."

"What are they doing to the world this time?"



"It's not our place to know."

And then she was hurrying away over grass striped with lengthening shadows. And she sang as she went, some atonal complex chant sung in a high clear voice that touched something in Karl even though he understood it not at all.

**A**nd now, as the hunters followed the ogre's trail through the steeply slanting forest, Anaxander pipingly played fragments of the girl's song, mixed in with scraps and snatches of other remembered melodies, and Karl mumbled at the edges of his memory of her, trying not to think of the terrible thing which had happened later. No, she wasn't for him.

At least the trail was easy to follow. Rather than keep to the clumps of rock which thrust through the rich mould of the forest floor, the ogre had followed a winding path over the soft ground between. It was almost too easy, but then all ogres were old, now. Karl's mother had regaled him with tales of desperate fights and hard tracking in the old days, and if even half those stories had been true, those ogres which remained were poor relics indeed. The last one Karl had helped dispatch had been quite without speech, a baby no doubt when it had all changed, grown wild in the years since, no more than a frightened animal. It had been a long time since Karl had learnt anything new about the oldtime, and that had been from the babblings of an arthritic half-crazed crone to whom Shem's knife had been a blessing.

They were high above the river now, could see an oldtime road like a broken-backed snake amongst the trees on the other side. Karl tried to imagine what it had been like, with autos roaring along in clouds of fire and smoke – that at least was something all the ogres agreed on, the terror and majesty of the oldtime roads.... Shem had stopped, was sniffing the air. After a moment Karl caught a trace of the scent, raw and foul in the hot air.

"Spiders," Shem said.

They went on cautiously, and soon Karl saw filthy grey webs swagged from tree to tree ahead, glimpsed a dark shifting movement within their shadows. He shivered. "I wonder what they were thinking of, bringing those things into the world."

Shem wiped sweat from his balding pate and said, slowly and seriously, "Everything has its purpose. We aren't to understand it."

"Pity they couldn't dream up something useful, something that would hunt down ogres."

"They have us," Shem said after a moment.

"I guess so, and what would we do if we didn't have hunting? I'd hate to be on one of those labour gangs pulling down the old buildings." Although sometimes Karl wondered just what was left in the miles of brick and concrete the gangs were slowly turning back into the earth. He sighed and settled his blanket-roll more comfortably. "Well, it won't have gone through those webs, anyhow. Spiders'll eat an ogre as happily as you and me, or you, Ax! Don't get too close now! Let's look around."

After only a brief search Shem gave a low call and Karl crossed to him, jeans brushing through ferns. The older man pointed to the freshly broken sapling, the waffleprint beyond.

Karl flapped at the midges which danced around

his head. "That's strange," he said. "The ogre is pretty lightfooted, but here it's broken this sapling like it deliberately stepped on it. As if it wants us to follow it."

"Stupid, maybe," Shem suggested. "Killed the unicorn, after all."

"That was dumb, not stupid. There's a difference. We'll go easy, you think? Watch every step. You hear, Ax?"

Grinning broadly, the idiot changeling shook hair from his white forehead.

There were other signs as they climbed the slope, slashed branches, red earth scraped free of moss. Karl, following Shem's example, cut a sturdy sapling and used it as a staff to probe before him, but it was Anaxander who sensed the trap, where the ogre's trail passed between two lichenous outcrops of rock.

The point of Karl's staff sank deep in the litter of broken branches there, and he kicked them aside. Beneath was a freshly dug pit, shallow and perhaps an arm's-breadth wide, twice as long. A dozen or more sharp-pointed stakes were set at its bottom, whittled points smeared with shit.

Shem looked at this for a long time. "Survivalists used this trick, long time ago now. All dead I thought. They wanted to fight, not hide. Kids left arsenals by their parents, see. I don't know...."

Anaxander was watching them with wide anxious eyes, and Karl said, "Don't worry, Ax, it's long gone. This trap, see, it hoped to catch us."

Shem scratched his stubbled chin.

"Now we go real slow," Karl told them.

But there were no more traps. The ogre's tracks, mostly keeping to a narrow deer-trail that wound amongst the trees, led on up the slope, crossed here and there by little streams. Karl's boots kept slipping on the skim of moss and liverwort over the wet clay. Here and there bushes with dark leaves were in flower, each small white star-shaped bloom as intense as an epiphany in the green shade. Then the trees gave out to scrub and grass and at last the three hunters gained the windy crest of the ridge, saw other ridges rolling away beneath the blue sky. Far out a small shape was crossing the sky from east to west. Shading his eyes, Karl could just see that it was a chariot pulled by a phalanx of huge birds, and he felt a pang of empty jealousy: there was some changeling Lord or Lady and here he was, slogging through the muck of the world.

The ogre had left a trampled track through the long dry grass. The hunters followed it down the reverse slope, and had not gone far into the trees when they reached the edge of a clearing where an oldtime ruin sagged in a shaft of sunlight, the collapsed shell of a wooden house beside a little brook shaded by dense ferns. There was a ragged black hole at the base of the ruin, a little apron of earth stamped flat in front of it; off to one side was a pile of blackened bones and other rubbish.

By now the three hunters had established a routine; rather than try to smoke out the ogre, it was safer (even if tedious) to wait for it to emerge of its own accord. Shem crept around to the back of the ruin and found a hiding place in a clump of ferns by the brook while Karl and Anaxander lay in wait in front, watching the ragged entrance to the lair. Once, Anaxander made to draw out his pipe and Karl swatted the idiot's hand

away, whispered to him to be quiet and still. The changeling looked at him with wide eyes, then rolled over to look up through the trees, his lips moving as he mumbled some melody or other. Unwittingly, as he waited, Karl's mind circled about the memory of the girl in the village, and of what had happened on that night, the night of the reshaping.

**H**e had taken a hunk of bread from the food she had left, poured himself a hefty shot of cider and retreated into the depths of the barn to brood on the day's small humiliations. And must have fallen asleep, for he woke with hazy light drifting through the doorway, the warm night beyond. Shem and Anaxander snored at different pitches. His muscles stiff from the day's ride, Karl stepped to the doorway. The air seemed to tingle with anticipation, small static discharges, and he remembered what the girl had said: a change.

Outside, the moon rode like a bruised baleful eye in green and yellow scarves of light which washed the whole sky. The little lights of the village shone around the swerve of the lake shore like stars settled to earth. Although the night air was warm, Karl shivered, wondering what was being worked on the world, what new thing was being brought into it or what was being changed, by the collective will of the changelings operating down in the whirl of elementary particles where what is blurs and widens into a myriad possibilities.

The lights of the slaughterer's house were also lit, and by their spilled glow Karl saw a pale shape on the grass near the edge of the water. The girl. His heart beating quickly and lightly, he walked down to her. Halfway there all the lights of the village and the lights behind him went off, but he was able to see well enough by moonlight and the cold flickerings of the aurora.

The girl sat crosslegged, leaning over the cradle of her knees. She didn't seem to be breathing.

Karl said, "I couldn't sleep either." There was no reply. When he knelt beside her he saw the whites of her eyes showing under her half-closed lids. "Hey," he said softly, and dared to touch her shoulder.

She shuddered, and in the same instant Karl felt a kind of contracting coldness over his whole skin. The change. The girl's mouth hung open, and he thought that he saw her tongue flick out. No, whatever it was, was like a pair of little whips. Then the dusty wings broke free of her lips and the fat moth flutteringly fell.

The girl was making a kind of hollow gargling. Something else was pushing past her lips with a slow heaving motion.

Karl fled, falling once and smearing grass and dirt on the knees of his jeans, getting more dirt under his fingernails as he pulled himself up and ran on. In the stuffy, scratchy heat of the barn, he lay awake a long time, seeing over and over the moth push out of her mouth into the world. And now, sprawled in dusty fern fronds, watching the entrance to the ogre's lair, he shivered despite the warm air at the memory, a queer cold feeling in the pit of his stomach. His mother had been right when she had said, as she so often did, that the changelings were not human.

The sun sank lower, brushing the top of the fern clump where Shem hid with brassy light. At last, Karl



saw a stirring in the ragged hole at the base of the ruins and the ogre poked out its shaggy head, pausing as if to sniff the air before slowly and painfully crawling into the open. At once Karl stood, and after a moment Anaxander sprang up too, trembling lightly. The ogre brought up its rifle and there was the faintest click. "Damn," it said in a high cracked voice, and Shem launched himself from his concealment and knocked it into the dirt.

**I**t was a woman, of course. Karl had guessed as much from the unicorn's murder. An old, scrawny woman, wrapped in a kind of cloak of badly tanned deerhide over ragged, faded oldtime jeans and workshirt, more darts than cloth, her hair tangled in greasy ropes. But she could talk, and once she realized that she wasn't going to be killed straight away she grew garrulous, told Karl that the unicorn had chased right after her to lay its great golden horn in her lap. That was when she had cut its throat.

The wrinkles on her face rearranged themselves around her smile. "Thought it was going to spear me straight off."

"It would have, if you hadn't been... well." Karl felt a cold clear elation, could only just control his eagerness to press out all that this creature knew.

"A virgin, oh yes! Never was anything but a few of us girls out here, heh heh." Then she frowned and said, "I hate those things they make. Hate them."

She needed only a little prompting from Karl to yield up her life story. Her name was Liza Jane Howard, she said, and she had lived here most of her life. "When the change came Pappy hid me here. He was a biologist, knew he was dying, everyone past puberty was dying, but didn't know the superbrights had done it. I didn't either, for the longest time. Changed the bacteria in the guts, see, so they killed any adult. After a couple of years it was all over, and then I guess they changed the bacteria back, so they could grow up, huh?" Karl nodded. He already knew this much from his brief interrogations of the other ogres he had helped to track down. "I stayed up here," she said, her eyes unfocused, that time of winnowing closer to her than the blue evening. "Kept to myself, that's how I survived. Oh, I'd talk to a few like me, but never let them know where I lived. Had a little girl here once, in the early days, sick little thing, died of pneumonia inside a month. Never did learn her name, suppose it was a blessing, huh? Haven't seen anyone for a couple of years now. Soon we'll all be gone and there'll be nothing but the superbrights."

"Those are the changelings," Karl prompted.

"You don't know, boy? See, back in the old days there was a way of enhancing a baby's intelligence before it was born, all the rich people had it done. But they didn't know just how much they changed those damned kids until the kids started changing the world. All the adults going was the first of it." She peered at Karl. "You didn't know?"

"Not the whole story." His mother had never taught him any history; but his mother had only been a baby when it had happened, an ordinary baby.

On the other side of the clearing, Shem coughed and spat, as always disapproving of this talk, wanting to finish the job. Anaxander scuffed at the grass, watching the ogre with mingled fear and fascination.

She said, "Wonder I stayed alive as long as I did, with all the changes going on. Waking up and finding giant spiders hung in the trees, or little dragons hiding under stones, whistling like kettles. And the wolves came back, never sure if that was natural or their working. Heh. Soon enough they'll have changed the world right out of the goddamn universe, then where'll you be, eh boy? You ever think about what'll happen when you hunt the last of us down?"

Karl remembered the cow killed in readiness for their return, the trusting way it had followed the slaughterer, its sudden unstrung collapse at the touch of his hand.

The ogre cackled. "Know why they changed it the way they did? You ever read oldtime books? Pappy left me with thousands."

Karl couldn't read, but he had heard about books from one or two of the ogres. His curiosity tingled under his entire skin. He had never before met an ogre who knew so much about the way things were before it changed.

"You come inside, boy. I'll show you," she said. "Show you where it all comes from."

"Sure, okay."

Shem stood, hand on the sheathed knife at his hip. "Listen, boy, that's a bad idea, a crazy idea."

"She can't hurt me," Karl said angrily. He had to know, had to see. Anaxander looked at him, looked at Shem, eyes wide. Karl said to the idiot, "It's okay, isn't it, Ax?" But the idiot looked away indifferently.

"I haven't a tooth left in my head," the ogre said, "and you've got my rifle there. I just want to show him how it was."

Shem pressed his hands over his ears, shook his head.

"Come on," Karl said, and pushed the ogre towards the ragged hole.

It stank inside, a mixture of old urine and sweat and hot tallow from the candles which burned in niches in the crumbling brick walls. A pile of rotting cloth made a kind of nest; more covered the floor, tearing beneath Karl's boots. He had to stoop beneath the cobwebbed ceiling. Muttering, the ogre rummaged through a pile of rubbish, disturbing insects which skittered away into shadow. At last she held up something big and square, opened it to show still-bright pictures. "See," she said, riffling the pages in front of Karl's face, "see?"

The pictures didn't move, as one ogre had told Karl, but still they held his entire attention: drawings of dragons, of griffins, of a unicorn with delicate hoof raised in some impossible leafy bower, of a village – He grabbed the book, peered at it in the uncertain candlelight. A cluster of white, thatched cottages surrounded by a high thorn fence, in a clearing in a dark forest. "What is this?" he said. He couldn't understand how an oldtime book could contain images of the here-and-now.

The ogre cackled, shadows deep in the lines of her face. "A children's book. Understand? Something made for children to look at, tales of made-up places to entertain them. When they changed the world, the superbrights were only children, the oldest my age back then. Eight, I think. Hard to remember. Most much younger. This was all they knew, so this was how the world was changed. All out of fairytale books.

Only it's real now, Utopia built on the bones of almost everyone who lived back then. Look at that, let me show you something else."

While she rummaged, Karl turned damp, mottled pages, blinking at the fantastic illustrations of the familiar. The ogre turned to him again, and he saw that she held a little pistol. Something in him relaxed. He had been expecting some such trick.

"My damn rifle might not have worked," she said calmly, "but this'll do for you and your friends. No offence."

The click as the hammer fell was small in the dank space. No other sound.

Karl said gently, "It's Anaxander. He's an idiot, but he's also a changeling. He has a power which stops weapons working against him or against his friends. He doesn't even have to think about it: it's like blinking."

The ogre screeched in rage and threw the pistol at Karl. He ducked and it clattered against brick as she rushed past, scrabbled through the entrance hole. Then silence. One by one the candles resumed their level burning. Karl calmly searched for the pistol and tucked it in his waistband, then crawled outside. Shem stood over the ogre's pitifully thin body, licking blood from the blade of his knife.

**M**uch to Shem's disgust, Karl insisted on burying the body. The older man sat on a boulder as Karl scooped out dirt with a board and said sulkily, "Won't do any good. Wolves will come and dig it up."

Karl furiously attacked the earth and didn't reply. By the time he had finished the evening light was almost gone. Sweating, he rolled the ogre's body into the hole, kicked dirt on top of it, stamped it down. Shem watched impassively; Anaxander idly piped fragments of melody. Karl took a pebble and scratched a spell on it, tossed it into the lair. Flame licked out instantly. The only conjurations he'd been taught were those which called up elementals, but they were enough.

Anaxander leading (glancing back now and then to see the shapes the smoke made as it rolled into the sky), the three hunters climbed through the forest. When they came out of the trees at the crest of the ridge they saw that the sky was alive with slowly writhing banners of light and Anaxander pointed, grinning delightedly. As they went on the changeling took out his pipe and played a slow rolling melody in solemn celebration of the change.

Shem said to Karl, his voice low, "Throw it away, boy."

Automatically, Karl's hand went to the pistol tucked in his belt.

"Won't do you no good. If he—" Shem pointed at the idiot who pipingly paraded ahead of them — "can stop oldtime things working, any of them can. I should know, huh?"

"That's just what they did to you talking."

"Maybe so. Can't see how I'd tell. Don't want to see you in trouble, boy, is all."

"What will happen?" Karl cried out. "What will happen when they don't need us anymore?"

Shem shrugged. Further down the trail Anaxander looked around, green eyes luminous, then went on,

playing his slow tune. Karl hefted the pistol, real as any unicorn or dragon, then abruptly threw it far into the undergrowth. The loss didn't matter. He knew now that a part of the oldtime lived still, would always live, in the fabulous conjured beasts, in the very stones, white as bone, of the cottages of the little village by the lake, of all the little villages of the changed world.

"Come on, boy," Shem said, and Karl hurried to catch up with him. Together, they followed the changeling down into darkness.

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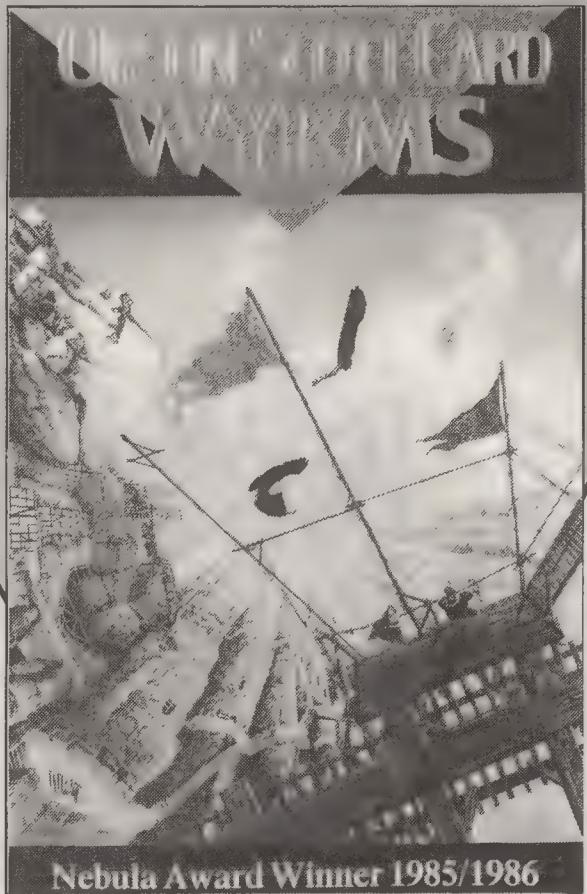
Paul J. McAuley's first novel, *Four Hundred Billion Stars*, is forthcoming from Del Rey Books in the US and Gollancz in the UK. Born in 1955, he is a biologist at Oxford University. He last appeared in this magazine with "A Dragon for Seyour Chan" (IZ 19), and he has also contributed pieces to *Amazing Stories* and *The Magazine of F & SF*.

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The book cover for "The Digging Leviathan" by James P. Blaylock is framed by a decorative border of stylized, swirling sea creatures. The title "The DIGGING LEVIATHAN" is prominently displayed in large, serif capital letters. Below the title, a smaller line of text reads: "A STUNNING FANTASY BY THE AUTHOR OF THE AWARD WINNING 'HOMUNCULUS' AND 'PAPER DRAGONS'". A paragraph of text below that states: "THIS EDITION IS LIMITED TO 1000 HARDCOVER COPIES. EACH INCLUDE A PREFACE BY THE AUTHOR AND ILLUSTRATIONS BY FERRET". Another paragraph below that says: "300 COPIES ARE SPECIALLY BOUND, NUMBERED AND SLIPCASED. THEY INCLUDE ARTICLES BY K.W. JETER (DEATH ARMS) AND TIM POWERS (THE ANUBIS GATES) AND ARE SIGNED BY ALL THE CONTRIBUTORS". At the bottom, it says: "SPECIAL EDITION: £ 35.00 (TRADE DISCOUNT 20%) TRADE EDITION: £ 11.95 (TRADE DISCOUNT 35%)". Further down, it says: "COMING IN OCTOBER 1988 THE PHILIP K. DICK AWARD WINNING NOVEL 'HOMUNCULUS' BY JAMES P. BLAYLOCK". At the very bottom, it says: "ORDERS TO: MORRIGAN PUBLICATIONS: 5 MYTHOP AVENUE, LYTHAM ST. ANNES, LANCASHIRE FY8 4HZ, ENGLAND TELEPHONE: LYTHAM ST. ANNES (0253) 730538". The author's name, "James P. Blaylock", is printed in a large, bold, serif font, with "Morrigan Publications" underneath it.

NEW FROM THE 1986 NEBULA  
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# WYRMS

A LEGEND PAPERBACK



# Karen Joy Fowler

## Interview by Paul Kincaid

Karen Joy Fowler won last year's John W. Campbell Award for best new writer by a convincing margin. In the two years since the appearance of her first published story she has hardly been out of Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine and The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, and this high profile was enhanced by the publication of a collection of short stories, *Artificial Things* (Bantam). She has a talent for writing finely crafted short stories, and at a time when sf writers are being shoe-horned into a variety of categories and groupings she has avoided any such pigeon-holing. Indeed several of the stories in *Artificial Things* are barely science fiction at all, and it is clear that the quality of the writing and the story-telling take precedence over the narrower demands of the genre. She took care to study under as many teachers as she could – including Kim Stanley Robinson – before she began submitting her work. The result is that now, in her mid-thirties, she is in the happy position of having seen every story she has written published.

I met her in Brighton at Conspiracy 87, the World Science Fiction Convention, the day before the Campbell Award was announced. We spoke just after she had appeared on a panel with David Brin and others which discussed science fiction's role in anticipating the future. It seemed an appropriate place at which to begin our conversation.

**That panel you've just been on was rather heavy. Do you think that's the proper study of science fiction?**

In its most beneficial form, science fiction should alert us to the sort of traps we might walk into unaware. But that's absolutely the best thing sf can do for us, and I don't claim I write that sort of stuff myself. I think my work looks back much more. I had this long argument with Bruce Sterling, because he feels that the only proper rule for science fiction is the one I've just described. We're rushing headlong

into a future and we don't know where we're going, and it's our job as sf writers. And I really do quite agree. But I think that what I'm able to provide, what I try to provide, is a concern about what we're losing. I'm much more concerned with trying to preserve things and trying to retain things than I am in alerting people to the dangers. That's not what I meant to say: I'm more capable of doing that.

**When I interviewed Bruce last year the first question I asked him was: "What is science fiction?", because he promotes himself as an ideologue and seems to have a very strict mind set for the sf he writes and promotes. Do you feel you belong to any set like that? No. If you ask any writer they'll say that.**

**Bruce didn't.**

Well, Bruce has created his own vision, that's quite another matter. I'd have to join someone else's. I think if you look closely at Bruce's work it's not very hard to make a case that the politics he talks to you about is reflected in his work. And I think that's true of all of us. I hope that's true of all of us. I sort of fell into science fiction in a way. I never thought that I was writing sf particularly. I have a few pieces which I think are sf, but certainly the book included many pieces which are very edgy and some pieces which have no science-fictional element.

**How did it come about that you "fell into" science fiction?**

Well, I wrote what I wrote and the science-fictional community was willing to publish it. It's really as simple as that. There are still people who treat me as if I somehow tricked my way into the field, they look at my work and say: "You don't belong here." But what I have found, much more than I have found in the mainstream, is that the sf publishing community is just more flexible in what they're willing to look at. Although they do enjoy discussing endlessly whether it's proper science fiction, or it's not proper science fiction, or it's cyberpunk, but in

fact they're willing to publish in all sorts of directions. I said this on a panel yesterday, that the field offers enormous latitudes to writers, and is very generous in the way it's willing to accept.

**Do you feel sometimes that there's too much latitude, that you could do occasionally with a few more restrictions?** No, I don't, since I depend on these latitudes. I think that I'm truly only interested in reading work that is interesting and capable, and I really don't care at all which category it falls into.

**You studied with Kim Stanley Robinson at one point. How did that come about?**

I took a course with him at the University of Davies. I had just begun to write, and I did start very late, and I happened to mention to someone that I had read a story of Stan's that I thought was wonderful. And the person I was talking to said: "Well, you know he lives here in Davies?" Which I didn't. I was stunned. Davies is such a small community, it's not like saying "he lives here in London." It was completely unexpected. A friend of mine who teaches in the same department that he teaches introduced me to him, and I said: "If you're ever teaching a course I'd be interested in taking it." And he did, very quickly. Actually he didn't have room for me on the course. I had to take it as a concurrent student, which means that you're not a regularly enrolled student and a place can't be saved for you under these circumstances. But someone dropped.

**Stan has told me that most of the stories in *Artificial Things* were written before you took the course. Is that so?**

That's so, and that's very generous of him because it's absolutely true but they were re-written after I took the course. I think that he was a great help to me. I feel that I would have learned everything that he taught me eventually, but it would have taken a couple of years and he taught it to me in six or seven weeks. His advice was very

practical. There were certain easily correctable mistakes I was making. He taught me to be very self-conscious about the ways I impart information. I look at my stories very carefully, and it comes in easily digestible doses. And just very practical advice – he shortened the way for me a great deal.

**Am I right in thinking that your first published story was the one in the Hubbard anthology, *Writers of the Future*?**

This is sort of technically true and not true. I'd sold a story to Shawna McCarthy at Asimov's first, and I sent the story to *Writers of the Future* and they called the next week – it was quite a thrilling week – to say they were taking the story for the book, and they were putting it together in such a hurry that the story did actually come out first. I believe that the story was included in the book because Algis Budrys liked it. He was one of the early judges, and the later judges were less impressed with it. I don't actually know, no-one has said this to me, but I think this is the way it worked.

**And then a very rare thing happened, you actually got a short story collection published.**

When this offer was made to me I was so naive about the field that I had no idea how rare this was. It's only much later that I've discovered. People began coming up to me at conventions with this "Who the hell do you think you are?" approach which surprised me. Then I figured out that there are lots of writers out there who don't have short story collections yet who would like them. Well, the collection didn't sell well, wasn't expected to. Shawna McCarthy, when she moved from Asimov's to Bantam, wanted me to write a novel, and I refused. I thought at that point that I was still very much a beginner, and it's one thing to muck up for 14 pages and have people read it, and another thing to expect people to read through 150 pages in which you are fumbling about. So I really felt unready, and the short story collection which Bantam did bring out eventually was very much part of this continuing negotiation over whether I would write a novel.

**The stories must have been piling up for some time to suddenly produce a full book's worth.**

Yes. Well, this is also one of the reasons why some of the work in the book is not at all science fiction. They pretty well said they would look at anything I had. We did try to put some fantastical element, however slight, in. I came to this turning point in my life where I had sold something, which was very thrilling and very frightening. I had to go away and write again, that was the unpleasant part. I truly hate doing the first draft of any work, I find it inten-

sely painful. I always have this faint, ephemeral idea which I think is going to be wonderful but I'm not terribly clear on how it's going to look, and I have to sit down and actually put it on the screen. And it's not wonderful at all, it's really dreadful. So I have this depressed feeling the whole time that I've taken this idea, which someone more skilful would have made wonderful, and I'm killing it. And it's awful. But once I have it all down, the part of writing which I really do enjoy is fixing. Then I start to make it better and I can see that each draft I do is getting closer to what I wanted.

**How many drafts do you do, then?**

I do quite a few. This also is changing. I think that as I am learning to write I am getting quite a bit faster, and the difference between my first draft and the final drafts is not nearly so great. On the first stories that I sold I would say that I had done no less than 15 drafts, and that the difference between the first draft and the last drafts was enormous, although probably the difference between the 14th draft and the 15th was not so considerable. And, you know, there are a great many stories in the book which I look at and I think: "If I could just take one more crack at it..."

**Do you ever feel a story's finished?**

I feel that I'm done with it, which is not quite the same thing. I don't know, I always feel in all my stories that there are moments that I am very proud of, moments in which it is all working beautifully, and it sort of appals me that what people expect of me is a story that works that well from beginning to end without any lapses – that seems like a lot to ask. But there are stories that I am very happy with.

**If writing a short story is so long and painful, what is writing a novel like?**

I'm just beginning to enjoy it. When I began it I was very resentful. When Shawna McCarthy first approached me and asked me to write a novel and I said no, I was at my very first convention and nobody had heard of me, nobody but Shawna had read anything I'd written. And I went through the whole convention with people coming up to me and looking at my name badge and saying: "Oh, you're the person who won't write a novel for Bantam." I was instantly famous, much more famous than I imagine the novel is going to be! I kept thinking if there

were television offers I could refuse and movie offers I could refuse, I would be really famous!

So, when I did agree to write the novel I began badly, very resentfully. I didn't think that I had an idea that I could sustain for more than 14 pages. It seemed to me that 14 pages was the natural length of time I could discuss any one topic. And I've had a great deal

of difficulty getting started. I've had to learn about writing novels. What I really did not want was an expansion of one of my short stories. I frequently find when I'm reading novels that I put them down thinking: "What a good short story that would have made." I really don't want people to think that way about my novel. Now about March I suddenly began to enjoy the particular book that I'm working on, and suddenly began to really like the character that I'd intended to use only for the first chapter and be rid of. I now find I'm far too attached to him to let that happen. And I begin to feel that I know what I'm doing and know what's going to happen to him.

**Is it still first draft stage?**

Yes. Well, I've done about a third of it I think. And I do it chapter by chapter so I break up the horror of the first draft. The part I have done is done, it's been through several drafts. I start a chapter, and then I'll fix it endlessly.

**If you spend so long on the first chapter isn't the next chapter like starting something different, you've lost the track of it?**

I think that's particularly true in this case because from chapter to chapter frequently the point of view character changes. And the story takes place in loops, every chapter will sort of go back to the beginning and then leap forward again. So yes, it's very hard.

**How do you overcome that?**

Discipline! Incredible self-discipline! I'm doing a great deal of research for the book. I told you that I'm very interested in my work preserving things and the novel does have a historical setting. One of the things that I like to use in my work are historical incidents and stories. Not the things that everyone's familiar with, so to that extent every new chapter is fun because I can go back to the library. But there always does come a point when you have to write again.

**Do you think there'll come a point when you find yourself writing an historical novel, then?**

To a certain extent I think that I am writing this as an historical novel. I'm being as accurate in some respects as I can be, but still retaining the freedom to make up. It's going to be the sort of book, I think, which annoys some people tremendously because you're not sure which part is factual and which part is not. Though I do think it will be fairly clear. I've been over to the Brighton aquarium because one of

my chapters begins with the building of the Brighton aquarium in 1872.

**So part of the novel is set here?**

No, but the chapter focuses on naturalism, the Victorian naturalist movement right at the point that Darwin begins to make an impact.

**How long do you reckon it's going to take you?**

I reckon it's going to be done by Christmas. Well, it will be in a final form as far as I am concerned and then my editor will look at it and I'm sure have some suggestions to make.

**Have you sold everything you've written?**

I've sold everything I've written, yes. I have some poems, if you're interested. I feel a little guilty because it makes it sound as if it's been very easy for me, and in a number of ways it really has been. But in those five years I worked very hard, I took it very seriously, I studied with everyone I could find to work with, and spent hours writing.

**Some British publishers seem slow about taking up American books, but you have the opposite problem with two British publishers, isn't it, wanting to take up *Artificial Things*?**

I know, but I don't hold those rights. I'm very naive about the business and those kinds of things. My agent tells me we have the translation rights, but he came into the negotiation kind of late. Maybe if he'd been involved earlier than I might have retained those rights.

**What's it like being on the Nebula Awards jury?**

Truthfully, it's very unpleasant. It has destroyed my reading for pleasure. And I pretty much said when I went onto the jury that I would not do the novels, but I would do the best I could with the short fiction. But there's so much material that you just read the beginnings of many things.

**Do you do reviews as well?**

No, I think that writing is difficult enough as it is. I just want to be supportive, I don't want to point out things that are wrong.

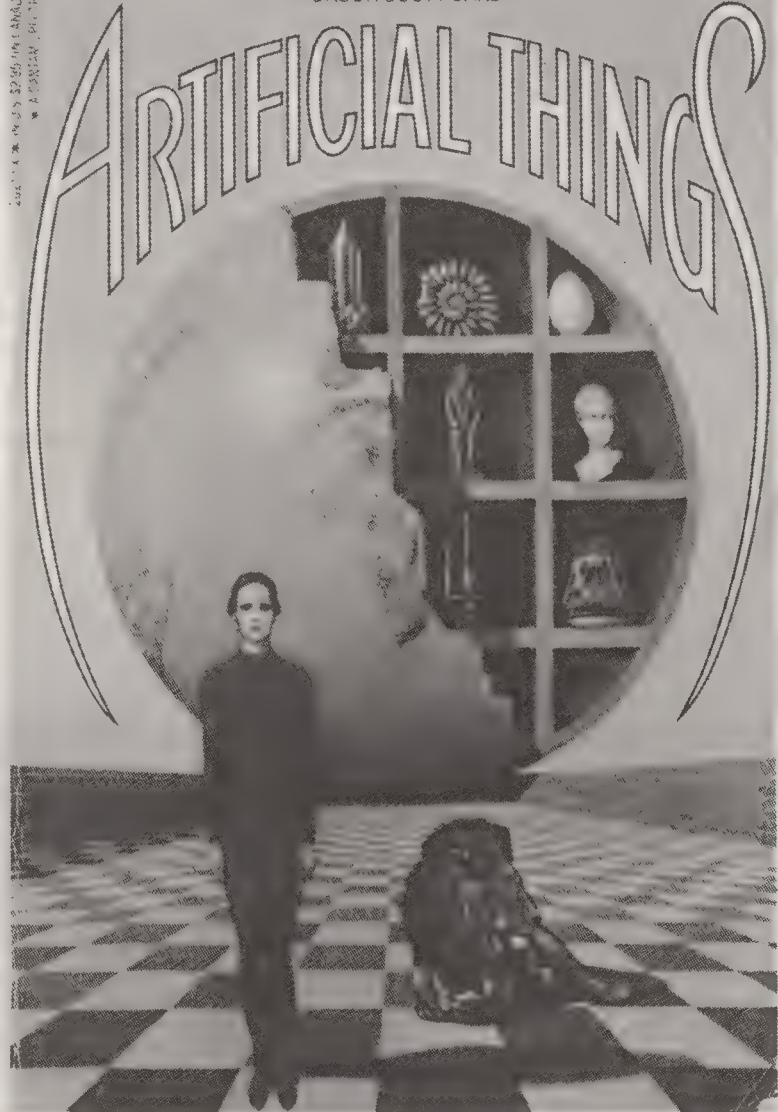
**You're nominated for the John W. Campbell Award for the best new writer. Do you think an award like that would make any difference?**

I'm sure, yes, it'll make a difference. My agent and my editor will be very pleased, my family will be very pleased, and I will be very pleased. But the Campbell Award, as near as I can tell, is not one of your major successes. I mean, it's very odd in many ways because it weeds out so many people because of the strictures. I'm very lucky because I came in with one story right after another and packed it all into the two-year eligibility period. But a great many people sell a couple of stories and then have a long period when they're working and then re-emerge. And they are new writers, they should be treated as new writers, but they're not eligible for this particular award.

**Karen Joy Fowler, thank you very much.**

# KAREN JOY FOWLER

"THE BEST NEW SHORT FICTION  
WRITER OF THE YEAR"  
—ORSON SCOTT CARD



Cover of Karen Joy Fowler's short-story collection, *Artificial Things* (New York, Bantam Spectra, \$2.95)

**Karen Joy Fowler's new story, "Heartland," will appear in the next issue of *Interzone*, on sale in May 1988.**

# Christopher Evans

## Artefacts

**A**t dawn Caro packed the children off to her mother's, then wandered around the empty house, checking that the doors and windows were locked. She lingered awhile in her husband's study, where the presence of the few remaining chimeras was strongest. They flittered unseen in the silence and shadows, forlornly seeking the mind that would never now make them discrete. They were like a whisper of wind, a movement not quite glimpsed from the corner of the eye; restless, abandoned. In a matter of days they would all be gone, and she would be left with memories and relics.

The large walled garden of the house was filled with many of her husband's earliest creations. There were some geometrical and crystalline forms, but most were figures: angels and lovers and dancers and waifs, a gallery of characters, once animate and gaily coloured, but all now ossified into grey stone.

All, that is, except for Kumash's final work, unfinished at the last. It hung in the air near the wrought iron gate where the two guards were stationed, the fleshed-in body of a faceless man grappling with the upper half of a translucent figure, as if struggling to wrench it into existence. Kumash had worked almost a whole season on it but had not yet brought it to life. And now it would never be finished.

**A** steady rain began falling as she accompanied the guards down the hillside to the town. She tugged the hood of her crimson cloak down further, grateful for its enveloping warmth. At least we are not poor, she thought. At least I can travel with a shred of dignity. She was glad of the guards' silence, for it made no demands on her.

The town had grown since Kumash's mentor, Vendavo, had made his home there half a lifetime ago. Visitors came at all seasons to see Vendavo's chimeras newly sprung from his brow. Vendavo the genius, they called him; or more often simply the Master. A small group of newcomers were standing on the out-

skirts even as she passed by, watching a cluster of figures do a bravura aerial dance.

The chimeras' golden faces were radiant, their beauty and grace of movement marking them immediately as Vendavo's creations: no one else could have put such life into them. Their garments flashed in brilliant spectral hues which lit the rain-filled gloom and the rapt faces of the onlookers, who were heedless of the wetness and the wind. They looked away only at the insistence of a small boy, who wandered around the crowd, prodding them with a collecting bowl into which they happily tossed coins. One of the Master's many grandchildren, no doubt.

The guards shepherded her past, and they turned down the muddy road towards Laaphre's spired mansion. Caro felt remote from everything, as if she was sleepwalking. The summons had come the previous night, a note pushed under the door and signed by Enthor, the chamberlain. Two Inquestors had arrived from the capital to pronounce judgement on her husband. They wished to interview her the following morning, in the mayor's residence.

Luck was with her, for the rain had emptied the streets; the few people who passed by were huddled under their cloaks. Laaphre, kindly to the last, had appended a handwritten note to the summons suggesting that she take one of the side entrances into the mansion via an alleyway. She soon saw why: a crowd had gathered at the front of the mansion. They looked restless, ill-humoured, scarcely entertained by the chimeras which gambolled and capered in the air above their heads. Even at a distance it was plain that the chimeras were inferior creations of Vendavo's disciples; one had even been fashioned to portray the Master, with his flowing white hair and the face of a devil-may-care sage. It attained only the status of parody.

Several of the artists and their children wandered around the crowd, soliciting coins, but with little

success. Across the square from the mansion was the white-domed templehouse where Vendavo had been murdered. The crowds were even larger there, but more orderly and respectful. They watched another of the Master's creations — a bird-like form of pastel colours — spiralling around the huge pyre-bowl where Vendavo himself had been cremated. A fire still burned in the bow, five days on, and the mourning had not ceased.

The bird-chimera was one of Vendavo's older creations, but it still retained all its colour and vitality. Relatively few of his works had ossified, unlike those of lesser artists. Chimeras were sustained by the appreciation of their audience, always seeking crowds. Most migrated to the capital where they could revel in the admiration of multitudes, but Vendavo's creations flourished everywhere.

**C**aro's escorts led her down the alleyway to the side entrance of the mansion, and she was ushered inside. Alone now, she walked down a wood-panelled corridor of warmth and mellow light. In the antechamber Enthor was waiting. She could see the unease on his face the instant he caught sight of her.

"They're ready for you," he said. "You'd better go in."

He spoke briskly and would not meet her eyes. This was the same man who had once told her how marvellous he thought her husband's chimeras were, what a future he had in store.

"Am I late?" she said. "I set off in good time."

"No, no. But better not to keep them waiting. They've already interviewed everyone else. Go straight in."

He indicated the double doors. Still he would not look at her. She removed her cloak unhurriedly, then waited until he was forced to take it from her. She walked past him without a further word.

The hall was far bigger than she had ever realized. At receptions it was always filled with tables, guests, the drone of conversation. Now it was empty and cavernous. At the far end, the two Inquestors were seated behind a table.

Laaphre was standing beside them, and he gave her a wan smile as she approached. The elder of the two Inquestors was a stout woman of middle age; her companion was a pale young man who blinked at her from behind wire-framed glasses. Both wore the dark blue tunics and the white skull-caps of their profession.

She stopped in front of the table; there was no chair for her. The Inquestors were both scrutinizing her. The woman looked severe and judgemental, the young man rather ill-at-ease. His lighter shaded tunic marked him as an apprentice, learning his subtle trade under the woman's guidance.

"This is Caro," Laaphre said to the Inquestors. "Kumash's wife."

"My name is Eshmei," the woman told her formally. "And this is Yanoyal. We are here to give a verdict on your husband's case."

Your husband's case. A perfectly neutral and innocuous way of describing it. As if they were about to discuss some civil affair such as a dispute over property or the execution of a will.

"It was a terrible shock to her," Laaphre began.



"Yes, yes," said Eshmei. "I'm sure she's quite capable of speaking for herself. You can leave us now."

Reluctantly Laaphre withdrew, raising his hands to Caro as if to say that he had done what he could. When the door closed behind him, Caro felt totally exposed before the Inquestors. Girding her defences, she decided to try to get it over with as quickly as possible.

"What do you want to know?"

Eshmei's face was set in a severe frown. She sat bolt upright in her chair.

"The most obvious question," she said, "is whether you consider that your husband was mad."

"Mad?"

"Not in full possession of his faculties when he committed the murder. It may have an important bearing on our verdict."

"He wasn't mad."

"Consider carefully. Bring your reason to bear on the question, not your emotion. The facts in the case are as clear as they can be. All that remains is the question of motive, of culpability. Did your husband kill Vendavo because he was deranged, or was it a premeditated act?"

"He wasn't deranged."

Eshmei smiled, but there was no pleasantness in it. "You surprise me. Most of the other witnesses have insisted that he must have lost his reason. Perhaps they were hoping to protect you from the consequences of your husband's crime?"

"He wasn't mad," Caro said again.

"Then in your view it was premeditated."

"I'm not saying that, either. I'm simply saying Kumash wasn't mad."

"If he wasn't mad, then it must have been premeditated."

"That isn't for me to judge."

"Isn't it? Then who is to judge, if not those who will have to live with the consequences of his actions?"

Caro kept her face free of any expression, denying all the pain and despair which she felt. Yanoyal was hunched over a ledger, diligently scribbling notes.

"I understand that Kumash left no suicide note," Eshmei said.

"No."

"He gave you no hint of what was going to happen?"

"No."

"I find that hard to believe."

"It's true."

Eshmei looked frankly sceptical. Caro knew that she was one of the Chief Inquestors in the capital who judged only the most heinous of crimes.

"Was he normally a violent man?" she asked.

"Never," Caro said firmly. "He hated violence. I never saw him even raise his hand in anger."

"Not even to discipline the children?"

"No. He sometimes shouted at them, but that was all."

Eshmei picked up a piece of paper without looking at it. "We've heard from other witnesses — Mayor Laaphre included — that Kumash had been somewhat reclusive in the period leading up to the murder."

"He had been working long hours on a new creation, putting great effort into it."

"Would you say he was under strain?"

"That depends on what you mean by 'strain'. Many artists experience mental pressure to a greater or lesser degree. Often it's what helps give their work vitality."

"Let me put it more plainly. Would you say Kumash was behaving normally before he murdered Vendavo and killed himself?"

"I saw little of him. He was engrossed in his work."

"What sort of answer is that? You were his wife. You lived in the same house together."

Her tone combined impatience and anger. Caro understood that there was no question of her being considered an innocent party in the murder. She shared Kumash's guilt by association.

"As far as I'm aware," she said evenly, "the only strain he was under was the usual one of bringing a work to life. Kumash was a quiet man. He rarely spoke of his inner feelings, even to me. I certainly had no reason to suspect he was going to kill Vendavo."

**E**shmei leafed through the papers in front of her. Yanoyal continued scribbling, his head bowed, his slender fingers pressing open the pages of the ledger.

"I'm told," Eshmei said, "that your husband was always devoted to Vendavo."

"That's true."

"He was one of the Master's first acolytes, was he not?"

"He wouldn't have seen it that way. 'Acolyte' implies 'follower', but Kumash never followed Vendavo. He was very jealous of the special character of his work."

"Nevertheless, he came here as a young man with the express purpose of seeking Vendavo's patronage, is that not the case?"

"Yes."

"And did not Vendavo take him on as an apprentice? Did he not teach him all the necessary disciplines of his art?"

"Kumash would have been the last to deny the debt he owed to Vendavo. But it was a debt of technique, not of form. Vendavo taught him the mental disciplines which enabled him to summon and materialize chimeras. But the form which they took was determined only by Kumash. His imagination remained his own."

Eshmei gave a smirk. "No doubt such fine artistic distinctions are of the highest importance, but here we must concentrate on more practical matters. Your loyalty to your husband is touching, and quite understandable in the circumstances. What are you trying to protect him from?"

"Nothing," Caro said immediately. "You want to know why he did it, but I can't help you. I don't know why."

"Indeed? Well, we shall see. You have two young children, I gather."

Caro nodded. "A daughter and a son."

"You were married soon after Kumash completed his apprenticeship."

"Yes."

"And Vendavo was an honoured guest at the wedding."

"Yes."

"They remained close friends, did they not, your

husband and the Master? Until the very end?"

"Kumash was still a young man when he first came here, and his father had died when he was an infant. Vendavo was more than just a mentor to him."

"The Master's generosity was renowned. He was always taking in waifs and strays, isn't that true? Giving anyone with the slightest talent the opportunity to learn from him?"

Caro felt a flicker of anger. But before she could say anything, Eshmei reached into one of her pockets and produced a small object which she put down on the table. It was a miniature head.

"The head was on display here at the mansion," she said. "Laaphre kindly let me borrow it for the purpose of this inquest. Do you recognize it?"

"Of course."

"One of Vendavo's, I gather. Actually, the artistry is unmistakable. It was done many years ago, wasn't it?"

The perfectly formed features of her husband's face were caught in a stony material that still retained a little of its colour, though the hair was greying and the blue eyes had faded somewhat. She remembered it as a newly created chimera, a still-life given sufficient mass by Vendavo so that it could be handled, placed on display. He had created it during the wedding reception, almost as an afterthought. Though a minor work, his genius was stamped all over it, and lesser artists would have struggled for days to fashion something with only a fraction of its qualities.

Caro had kept the head on the mantelpiece in the living room for some years until the visiting Laaphre, in a misguided attempt at flattery, had pretended that he thought the head was a self-portrait, Kumash's own creation. Her husband's mood had been black for days afterwards. And then the head had vanished.

"I gather," said Eshmei, "that this object was given to Laaphre as a gift by your husband."

Caro nodded. "He admired it."

"Do you think your husband was jealous of Vendavo?"

"No."

"Are you quite sure? Not in the least bit jealous?"

"No. Not in the way you think."

"And what way would that be?"

She felt her defences crumbling. "Everyone knew that Vendavo was the finest artist of all. Everyone knew he was the best."

"Your husband included?"

"Kumash continually marvelled at his abilities. But he wasn't jealous in the sense that he begrudged him them."

"In what sense then?"

She was floundering. "I don't know. He didn't want Vendavo's gifts. He just wanted to be better."

"Better?"

"Better than anyone. Not just Vendavo."

"But Vendavo was the best."

"Kumash was devoted to him. He always acknowledged freely the help he had been given to perfect his own art."

"It scarcely seems like an act of devotion to stab him to death inside the templehouse, in full view of several apprentices."

The horror of it all still lived with her, sealed under the functioning exterior which she had maintained

for days. She had been summoned to the templehouse immediately after the murder, and had arrived breathless to find that neither body had been moved. Vendavo lay on the white marble steps below the altar, a huddled, pathetic figure in a bloodstained cream robe. His apprentices surrounded him, some weeping copiously. Kumash was sprawled at his feet, having fallen on the knife which he had used to stab Vendavo in the heart. There was a frozen expression of anguish on his face.

"He simply walked into the templehouse, did he not, and plunged the knife into Vendavo's chest?"

It was a moment before Caro could answer. "So I've been told," she said.

"While Vendavo was instructing his apprentices in the various techniques of mental focusing?"

"Yes."

"Prior to this, he hadn't visited the templehouse in some months."

Caro shook her head.

"Yes or no?"

"Not as far as I'm aware."

"Which seems to suggest that he intended the murder and his own death to be witnessed by others."

Caro thought about it. "Perhaps it does."

"Which might imply that he had planned the act in advance."

"No. I don't see how you can imply that at all. It might still have been done on the spur of the moment. Kumash would have known that he'd be likely to find Vendavo there."

"Is that what you think happened?"

"I'm not saying that. But it's possible."

It was strange to be discussing Kumash's behaviour in such an abstract way. But she could only contemplate it comfortably as an abstraction.

"What was your own relationship with Vendavo?" Eshmei asked.

"He was a friend of the family," she replied.

"No more?"

"What do you mean?"

A sly smile. "The Master's fondness for other men's wives was well known – as was his lack of scruples in enticing them into his bed."

"What are you trying to imply?"

Anger was a safe emotion, and she made no attempt to hide it. But Eshmei simply waved a pudgy hand soothingly. "I am implying nothing. The purity of your reputation has preceded you, well attested by your friends. I was simply wondering if Vendavo ever made any advances to you."

Caro hesitated. "Once or twice, many years ago."

"And you rebuffed him?"

"Yes."

"Did Kumash know about this?"

"No. I never told him."

Eshmei nodded sagely. "You didn't care for Vendavo?"

"Our relationship became amicable once I made it plain that I had no intention of sleeping with him. I admired his art as much as anyone else. But he was my husband's friend, not mine."

"I see. Then sexual jealousy could not possibly have been a motive?"

"No. There would have been nothing to be jealous of."

Once again Eshmei leafed through the papers in front of her. Caro composed herself as best she could.

"Let us assume," Eshmei said, "that you really don't know why your husband killed Vendavo. Speculate. Give me your best guess."

Was the woman serious? Plainly she was.

"That's not fair," Caro said. "I've told you I don't know."

"I'm asking you to speculate. Make an informed guess on your husband's motive. Surely that's not beyond your powers?"

"No," Caro insisted. "I can't."

Eshmei sighed impatiently. "You are an intelligent woman, but do not do me the courtesy of underrating my intelligence. I am here to get to the bottom of this, and you will stand there until you give answers to my satisfaction."

She waited. Caro remained silent.

"Do you fully appreciate the gravity of the situation? Vendavo was enormously popular, and there are hundreds of people in this town alone who would happily kill you for putting food on your husband's table. Kumash has deprived the world of a great artist who still had much great art to create."

Caro would have been the last to dispute this. Ageing though he was, Vendavo had been in vigorous health and still at the height of his powers. It was a tragedy on all fronts, but a tragedy on which she couldn't allow herself to dwell. All the grief, the horror, the shame – it had to stay locked away for a while. She had to keep functioning, for the children's sake if not for anyone else's.

"Well?"

"You're asking me to pass judgement on my husband. I can't do that."

"We can have you locked up for refusing to cooperate with this inquiry."

"Do what you wish. The worst has already happened."

**C**aro didn't know whether the threat was seriously intended, or whether her reply was itself a bluff. It was hot in the hall, and she longed to sit down. But she was certain that no chair would be provided if she asked for one.

Eshmei seemed to relent, for she began asking Caro questions about Kumash's behaviour on the day of the murder. Caro had little to tell her, but she was happier reciting facts. Kumash had risen early and locked himself in his study, as was his usual habit. She had taken the children to school. When she had returned, he was gone. Soon afterwards a messenger had arrived from the templehouse with the news that both her husband and Vendavo were dead.

"And you still insist you had no inkling of what was going to happen?"

Caro shook her head. "None."

There was a pause. Once more Eshmei consulted the documents in front of her, taking her time over it. The white caps made the Inquestors look both learned and skull-like, arousing reverence and fear. As a uniform and symbol they were perfect.

"May I?"

It was Yanoyal who had spoken, in a quiet, almost diffident voice. He was still huddled over the ledger, peering askance at Eshmei and adjusting his spectacles.

She looked up, seemed surprised, but nodded.

"Proceed," she said.

He blinked shyly at Caro over his glasses. She knew that as an apprentice, his opinion on the case would carry no legal authority. Eshmei would consider his views, but she alone would give the final verdict. But he was obviously determined to play his part.

"I gather your husband didn't finish his last creation.."

"No," she told him.

"Perhaps he despaired of creating the perfection he sought?"

"That would be more likely to make him work harder."

"Did you love him?"

The question was unexpected, and it threw her for a moment.

"Yes," she said. "I did."

"And did he love you?"

"Yes. I believe he did."

Yanoyal made a brief note of her responses. He had apparently written his questions down in advance. Without looking up, he said, "You've already told us that your husband considered Vendavo to be the best artist of all. Did he have a high regard for his own work?"

"He was a perfectionist," Caro said. "He would never accept second best. So he was always critical of what he produced."

"In the early years of your marriage, he earned little from his art and I gather that you supported the family."

"Yes."

"As a washer-woman."

"Yes."

"Did you always support his aims as an artist?"

"Always."

"Because you loved him?"

"Yes."

"Was he a happy man?"

Yanoyal kept his head bowed so that the top of his cap stared at her like a blank face.

"He set the highest standards for himself," Caro said. "That rarely leads to contentment."

"But later his work became a critical and commercial success. Didn't this make him happy?"

"It helped ease certain pressures, but it wasn't everything. Kumash was his own sternest critic. He was never completely satisfied with his work."

"He wanted to be a great artist."

"I've already said as much. He was an orphan, and he always said that becoming an artist had given meaning to his life. He wanted to leave behind something lasting."

She saw a smile appear on Yanoyal's lips, but still he did not look up. "He worked very hard at his art?"

"Yes. No one was more dedicated."

"His unfinished creation – it's at the bottom of your garden, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"But I understand that Kumash normally worked in the seclusion of his study."

"Normally, yes. But not invariably."

Yanoyal referred to a sheet of paper. "Yet for several days or more prior to the murder, I gather that he was again spending his time inside his study."



"That's true."

"Instead of completing his creation?"

Caro essayed a shrug.

"Was he producing something else?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Then what was he doing?"

"Sometimes, when he had difficulties with a creation, he would pause. Spend time meditating, focusing his mental energies."

"For a whole month?"

"How can I possibly know exactly what he was doing? I can't see through a locked door! What is it you want from me? I wasn't privy to my husband's innermost thoughts. He never liked to be disturbed when he was in his study, and I always tried to respect his wishes. Who can possibly know why anyone does anything in the final analysis? The only person who can tell you for certain why Kumash killed Vendavo is Kumash himself."

Her outburst was born of fatigue and exasperation, but she did not regret it. Yanoyal, however, took it quite calmly.

"Thank you," he said softly.

Eshmei was frowning at him, perhaps deeming his line of questioning irrelevant or impertinent. As if to stamp her authority on the proceedings once more, she began to ask Caro more questions about Kumash's activities and state of mind in the period leading up to the murder. Caro answered them as best she could, often repeating herself. Yes, Kumash had been very preoccupied with his work. Yes, he had seemed a little remote from her and the children. No, he hadn't discussed his problems with her. Yes, he had been

overworking and seeing none of his friends. No, he had never previously behaved violently to herself or anyone else.

It seemed to her as if Eshmei was once again seeking evidence that Kumash had been unbalanced, and Caro wondered if she was foolish to insist that he was sane. Should the murder be declared an act of madness, then there would be no penalty. But if it was deemed to be premeditated, then there would be consequences — a heavy cash fine, perhaps, or the revenues of all Kumash's works taken by the state. But she couldn't accept that Kumash had gone mad, and she had to remain true to her convictions, whatever the cost.

Memories of Kumash now began to gather: she could no longer deny them. Their first meeting, he newly arrived in the town to seek Vendavo's patronage. Their courtship, a time when he had been as passionate towards her as he always was towards his art. Visits to Vendavo's house, a place crowded with works of art and thick with unseen chimeras awaiting the Master's summons. Vendavo himself, a big, hearty, generous man, almost irreverent about his art, conjuring up brilliant chimeras while eating or drinking with his gaggle of grandchildren running around his heels and perched on his knees.

The contrast with Kumash's painstaking efforts could not have been more stark. Diligently her husband had accompanied Vendavo to the templehouse every morning in those early years, there to perfect the powers of concentration which would attract the chimeras and condense them from thin air. Kumash had never found it easy, no matter how studiously he

practised, no matter how much encouragement the ever-magnanimous Vendavo had heaped upon him. "You're the best of my pupils," the Master would tell him. "The very best." But that had never been enough. Her husband's tragedy was that he had been a perfectionist who could never reach his own standards of excellence.

She had watched him at work in the garden on his last creation. He had laboured all afternoon to bring forth the faceless figure. Sitting cross-legged on the grass, eyes closed, he had concentrated and concentrated until finally a flickering in the air had heralded the slow manifestation. At length the chimera had materialized – a ghostly figure, half in limbo, half in the visible world. Night had fallen before the shape had stabilized and acquired a feeble blush of colour.

And that was only the start. Kumash had laboured almost a whole season on the figure, shaping and refining, agonizing over its every flaw. He slept badly, woke before dawn, worked every available hour on the creation. His art had never come easily to him; indeed, it became harder the more he struggled and failed to find that spark of genius.

Caro was always the first to be allowed to see his finished work. This was the moment she dreaded most of all. Kumash would be eager for her praise, but at the same time insistent that she be brutally frank with him. He seized on the slightest hint of prevarication, was suspicious of unqualified praise, thrown into gloom by any criticism, however minor. Whatever she said, it always ended badly.

She had no answer to the problem, for brutal frankness wasn't possible. Kumash's creations were always shapely, colourful, their movements pleasing to the eye; he deserved his popularity. But he was always aware, more powerfully than anyone else, that they lacked the magnificence of great art.

If only he could have accepted second best. But this had never been in his nature. And so his bitterness and frustration had grown, deepening with each creation. He would tell her of the brilliant visions which he held in his mind, and of how the actual manifestations failed him. Meanwhile she tended the house and raised the children. He had always been a considerate husband in his way, kind to all of them, often loving. But he had poured so much of himself into his art that there was little left over for her and the children.

Tears were welling in her eyes. She blinked them back. Only now did she become aware that Eshmei was no longer questioning her but had turned to Yanoyal.

"Do you have any further questions?" she asked him.

How much longer would it go on? She couldn't stand much more. To her relief, Yanoyal slowly shook his head.

"It's time we considered our verdict," Eshmei said briskly. "You will wait outside until we call you."

**C**aro settled herself on the hard wooden bench opposite the double doors. Enthor was nowhere to be seen – a small comfort. Since the murder, she had only felt really secure when she was alone.

The inquest had been the ordeal she had imagined, but she felt she had acquitted herself reasonably well.

She had maintained her loyalty to Kumash while keeping her deeper feelings about him hidden. They were private, a matter for her alone.

But what were her deeper feelings? Only now did she realize that a sense of betrayal was uppermost. She had made endless sacrifices for the sake of Kumash's art, but he had given her little in return. His work had always come first, and all her love had been no substitute for it. That was what rankled – and the fact that he hadn't even left her the meagre comfort of a suicide note. To the end, the distance between them remained unbridged. She and the children were simply left with his absence and a mystery that might never be solved.

Of course the Inquestors would reach a verdict, and it would be enshrined in the annals for the benefit of future historians. Ah, they would say, poring over the musty pages of Yanoyal's ledger, that was what happened, that was why Kumash killed Vendavo. As if there was always a discrete motive, an identifiable reason. The Inquestors thought in the certainties and absolutes of their profession, as Kumash had done in his.

A door opposite the hall opened and Enthor appeared. He was carrying a pewter tray on which was a plate of mashed vegetables and a mug of hot blackcurrant cordial.

"I thought you might want something," he said hastily, putting the tray down on the bench beside her. He looked uncomfortable, and she could see his plump cheeks turning pink.

"Thank you," she said.

He played with his hands, hesitated.

"I'm sorry," he blurted, and then he turned and hurried away.

Caro couldn't face the food, but she sipped at the cordial. Whatever happened, she would survive somehow, protect the children. Most likely she would have to leave the town, find a new place to live. A smaller house, and one without any trace of chimeras.

Sooner than she expected, the double doors opened and Yanoyal stepped out.

"You can come in now," he said softly.

She followed him across the empty hall to the table. Eshmei sat waiting, a piece of paper in her hands. Laaphre was standing behind her as a witness. He shook his head sadly at Caro.

Eshmei waited until Yanoyal had resumed his seat. Then she referred to the paper:

"Jealousy would seem the obvious motive in this case, but many small facts point elsewhere. Whether the accused was sane or not when he committed the murder is a moot point – the sanity of anyone who murders is moot. In strict legal terms, however, the testimony of witnesses indicates that the accused, while under some strain, was not behaving abnormally prior to the murder. It also suggests that the murder was not a sudden act of passion or derangement but had been contemplated in advance and was carried out in such a way as to draw maximum attention."

Eshmei looked up at Caro from the paper. "All the evidence regarding your husband's relationship with Vendavo indicates that he loved him and freely acknowledged his genius. But at the same time the plain fact of the murder indicates a – how shall I say

it? – a desperate measure on Kumash's part. Something that went beyond love for any single human being."

She paused, as if expecting some response. Caro glanced again at Laaphre. Though he was standing, he seemed somehow dwarfed by the Inquestors. He looked downcast, and she prepared herself for the worst.

"Kumash's work is well known in the capital," Eshmei went on. "It's not as popular as Vendavo's, of course. But then your husband did not quite have his genius, did he?"

Caro remained silent. Now that the inquest was over, she knew she was not required to say anything further.

"I believe your husband regretted this. I believe he was aware of his limitations as an artist to a painful degree. A desperate degree. And his desperation grew and grew until finally he could no longer bear the idea that his work wasn't good enough. He knew he could never hope for a place in history like his master – unless. Unless he did something to ensure that his work would never be forgotten."

How much longer would the woman talk? Why didn't she simply give the verdict?

"Do you know that your husband's creations are now more sought after in the capital than ever before? They have acquired a notoriety value – something I believe Kumash specifically intended when he murdered Vendavo. If someone knows that he lacks the talent for true fame, then infamy may seem the next best option. Your husband became sufficiently unhinged with the knowledge of his limitations to see this as the only apotheosis he could hope for. His motive was not jealousy but the fanatical desire to immortalize his work."

Silence at last. Caro remained determined to say nothing. Yanoyal had put his ledger aside and sat frowning into his folded hands. Something told Caro that he didn't agree with this analysis of Kumash's motive.

"The verdict is premeditated murder," Eshmei announced. "The penalty is confiscation of all property in Kumash's name and all future revenues from his chimeras. Do you have any reason to dispute these judgments?"

It was far harsher than she had imagined. Yet in some perverse martyr's way she felt that it was just. All she wanted now was to leave.

"No," she said. "None."

"Then I see no reason why we should delay you further."

**C**aro did not linger in the mansion, wanting above all to avoid Laaphre. He was the kindest of men, but kindness was precisely what she could not bear at the moment: it would crack her like an egg.

Outside the guards were gone and the alleyway was empty. She went directly home, huddling deep into her hood and keeping to the sidestreets. No one recognized her or hindered her passage. At least she could feel relieved that the inquest was finally over and the verdict given. Perhaps now she could begin to plan for the future without Kumash.

The rain had stopped and the skies were clearing

as she climbed the path to her house. Entering the garden, she saw the havoc that had been wrought in the short time of her absence. Kumash's chimeras had been overturned and smashed to pieces, broken limbs and heads stamped into the mud, rhombs and star crystals reduced to shards scattered everywhere. The garden had been turned into a morass by the tread of many feet – a mob, no doubt, who had perhaps fled on seeing her climb the path from the town.

Only the incomplete work above the gate was untouched. It had survived because it had no solid substance; mud and rocks would have passed straight through it. Given that it hung at eye-level above the garden, Caro doubted that Kumash had ever meant to endow it with either solidity or mass, though it would of course acquire both when it began to ossify, sinking slowly to the earth. But for now it was inviolate.

For long moments she simply stood there, not knowing what to do. Then she hurried up the path and unlocked the door to the house.

Nothing had been disturbed inside. The larder was still stocked with food, and the chest holding their valuables had not been touched. At least they aren't blaming me, she thought. And then, ashamed of it, she went back out into the garden to salvage what she could.

She was righting a small stone cupid which had miraculously survived the attack when a voice came through the gate:

"Caro? What's happened?"

It was Iriyana. Caro had not seen her since the cremation. She hurried into the garden, her orange cloak dragging in the mud.

"They came while I was at the inquest," Caro told her. "Smashed up everything they could."

Iriyana did not bother with words of sympathy; she simply knelt down beside her and began to help her search through the mud for complete pieces and fragments that might be reassembled.

Sunlight and shadow flooded the garden as clouds scudded by overhead. Caro watched Iriyana carefully picking broken crystals from the mud and placing them on the flagstone path. She had been both Vendavo and Kumash's agent for many years, arranging exhibitions of their work and collecting revenues.

Caro felt that she had to say something.

"I'm surprised you came. You must hate Kumash for what he did."

Iriyana looked up. "Caro, I'm far more concerned about you and the children at the moment."

"It must be hard. Two of your most popular clients gone at a stroke."

"You can't blame yourself for what Kumash did. Vendavo had a long and prolific career. His works will be earning money for many years to come, and they'll live on long after we've gone. I doubt that Kumash could help himself."

Caro began to cry. Iriyana put an arm around her shoulder until finally she stopped. Then they resumed their rooting through the mud, stacking the larger fragments against one wall.

"What happened at the inquest?" Iriyana asked at length.

"The verdict was premeditated murder. They're going to confiscate everything."

Tears were rolling down her face again. Iriyana took

her into the house and sat her down in front of the hearth. She lit the fire which Caro had laid that morning, then fetched flannels and towels from the wasbroom. Their arms were muddied to the elbows.

"You can always appeal against the verdict," Iriyana said as they washed themselves.

Caro shook her head. "No. Enough's enough."

Iriyana took her hands. "Try not to worry. I'll make sure you're provided with another house. Laaphre's offered to help as well."

"I can't ask you to do that."

"I insist, Caro. We were friends before this happened, and we can't let it come between us now. And it isn't just charity. I've earned a good commission over the years on Kumash's work alone. It's the least I can do."

The fire began to blaze merrily. Caro had prepared a pan of soup the previous evening, and Iriyana put it on to warm.

"Where are the children?" she asked.

"At my mother's. They'll be staying there for a few days. I thought it would be best."

"How are they taking it?"

"I don't think either of them really understands what's happened. They haven't absorbed the fact that they're never going to see their father alive again." Caro swallowed. "In a way, it's been a minor blessing, making it easier for me to cope."

She warmed her hands at the fire. It was the first time it had been lit since Kumash's death. Like Vendavo, her husband had undergone a form of cremation: he had been thrown on to a bonfire by a mob, his chimeras shunned so that they had disappeared from the town.

Iriyana ladled out some soup.

"They claim Kumash did it to immortalize his art. To make himself notorious."

"Then they're fools," Iriyana said. "That would be completely out of character, wouldn't it? He always hated sensationalism."

"Do you think he went mad?"

Iriyana shook her head, but it wasn't a denial. "Caro, perhaps it's better not to dwell on it now. Perhaps we'll never know."

The room filled up with silence. Then Caro sensed the unseen presence of a chimera – the merest hint of a rustling in the air. Quickly it was gone. She saw that Iriyana had registered it, too. Neither of them spoke.

Caro emptied her bowl of soup. At length Iriyana said, "I ought to be getting home. There's a lot to be done."

"Of course. Thank you for helping."

"Why don't you come with me? There's a spare bedroom you can have for the night."

Caro shook her head. "I'll be all right."

"What if the mob comes back?"

"I doubt that they will. They've already had their revenge. And I need some time alone."

Iriyana did not press her. They both donned their cloaks and went down to the garden gate together.

"I'll call in again tomorrow," Iriyana said. She paused to stare at the faceless man wrestling with the phantom. "You were lucky they left that one alone. I think it may well be Kumash's best work."

"He was always so diligent once he started some-

thing. I still don't understand why he didn't finish it."

Iriyana looked at her. "You surprise me, Caro. My impression is that it is finished."

**C**aro watched from the gate until Iriyana disappeared over the brow of the hill. Then she resumed her task of tidying the garden. A steady, refreshing wind blew as she worked, and a songbird chirruped at her from the wall. Dusk was beginning to gather by the time she was finished. The rescued remains looked a pitiful sight, but she was sure that several of the chimeras could be repaired. And at least the garden no longer looked a shambles.

She thought of Kumash's last days – days spent sealed in his study, doing no work whatsoever. She had left food outside his door, but often it went uneaten. He was sunk in gloom, scarcely speaking to her and the children on the rare occasions when he emerged from the study. She knew he was more unhappy than ever with his work, had sensed a crisis looming. But nothing could have prepared her for the murder of the man he idolized above all, let alone his own suicide. Only now was she beginning to understand.

Iriyana had given her the clue. It seemed obvious now, and perhaps she had deliberately blinded herself to her husband's art of late, unconsciously recognizing it as the source of the widening gulf between them. Kumash had made his final chimera luminous so that it would be visible by night, and already it was giving off a silvery glow. The hands of the faceless man grappling with the wraith were Kumash's own. A few nights before the murder he had cried out in his sleep: "Damn them all!" She had assumed he was cursing the enemies he imagined he had among the commentators who had criticized his work. But he hadn't meant them at all, or any other human being.

She was standing beside the chimera when three figures came into view over the top of the hill. Two of them were the guards who had accompanied her to the inquest. The third was a figure in blue whose eyes flashed gold as the setting sun glinted on his spectacle lenses.

Caro put her hands around the spears of the gate. Like a soldier behind a fortress, awaiting an attack.

Yanoyal greeted her with a nod. He was not wearing his skullcap, and his hair was cropped to a dark stubble. He surveyed the garden without emotion. "Iriyana informed us that a mob had destroyed your husband's creations. Mayor Laaphre insists that the house is guarded tonight."

Caro did not move or speak. The two guards took up position on either side of the gate. Yanoyal looked up at Kumash's final chimera.

"Is this what your husband was working on?"

"Yes."

"Remarkable," he said, making the word sound drab.

Caro had no intention of inviting him through the gate. He adjusted his glasses on his nose. "The bailiffs will be arriving tomorrow morning to take possession of the house. You will, of course, be allowed to retain its contents. I'm sorry it's come to this."

"Are you?"

"Do you have other arrangements for yourself and your children?"

"We'll manage."

He was still scrutinizing the chimera. Experimentally he raised a hand and passed it through the body of the faceless man.

"Eshmei and I will be returning to the capital tonight. Before we leave, there was one minor point that I wanted to clear up — a small detail which still perplexes me." He glanced briefly at her. "It concerns the question of motive. Eshmei has taken the view that your husband was seeking to immortalize his work, yet somehow I find that rather difficult to accept."

Dark clouds were massing again, and the wind had turned cold. Caro clung on hard to the gate.

"I'm not here in my official capacity, of course, but merely as an interested individual. Now that the judgment has been given, nothing can alter it — short of the deceased coming back to life." A brittle laugh. "I simply want to satisfy my own curiosity."

Still he was pretending to study the chimera, giving her only an occasional shy glance. But his shyness was deceptive, a means of disarming suspicion. The truly diffident would never have been chosen as Inquestors in the first place.

"I can't believe that your husband was seeking to immortalize his art. It seems to me that he was an honourable man in his way, wouldn't you agree? And you've already told us that he was his own sternest critic. I don't think he had any illusions about the lasting value of his work, or any desire to invest it with a spurious fame."

The landscape had darkened, and heavy rain suddenly began to fall. Caro was determined not to let him into the garden. He was looking directly at her now, all pretence of shyness gone.

"I believe he did it to immortalize himself. If he couldn't find a place in history through his own creations, then he would do so by killing someone greater than himself, become known for ever as the Master's murderer. That was the infamy he sought."

Caro almost laughed in his face, but she managed not to reveal her incredulity. Yanoyal looked eager for her to confirm his theory; his lenses shone silver in the chimera's glow. Caro reached over the gate and slapped him hard across the face. He recoiled, staring at her with surprise.

"Yes," she said. "That was why he did it."

Rain beaded the window as she watched Yanoyal head back towards the town. Soon he was lost from sight. To come to the house in order to satisfy himself on the nuance of a verdict revealed not only an utter dedication but also a ruthless perfectionism. He would have little difficulty in becoming a master of his craft.

And yet he was wrong about Kumash, as Eshmei had been wrong. They hadn't bothered to visit the garden and inspect Kumash's final work before the inquest. Perhaps Iriyana or another witness had described it to them and they had deemed the description sufficient, the work itself not pertinent to the case. Neither had much appreciation of art, she was sure of that. Yanoyal, obsessed by his own version of the truth, had stood at the gate, missing the clue that was staring him in the face. But she had missed it, too, until Iriyana had made it plain to her. Of course,



no one could know with certainty why Kumash had killed Vendavo, but she was quite sure she understood at last. She had satisfied Yanoyal with a lie, and that was her consolation.

She banked the fire up and put the soup on to warm once more; there was enough left to fill the bellies of the guards. Outside the rain poured down through the shining chimera: it grew brighter as the darkness deepened. Unlike the mobile forms which had fled the town, this one was fixed in the place of its birth, Kumash's final defiant statement.

Perhaps there was, after all, a sense in which he had been mad at the end. Certainly Eshmei was right in that he had been driven by despair, and it was ironic that he probably would achieve a form of immortality through being remembered as Vendavo's murderer. But he hadn't intended that, she was sure. Ultimately he had experienced his own form of betrayal — the betrayal of his talent, the very thing which had powered him through most of his life. His chimeras had failed him through their imperfections, and so he had turned against them and against art in general. In his final despair, it must have seemed to him that Vendavo was responsible for leading him down the path to the ultimate realization of his inadequacy. And that was why he had murdered him.

Caro opened the window and called the guards inside. They appeared out of the darkness, lit by the pearly glow of the chimera. Kumash had indeed finished it. He had left the man's face blank as a symbol of his alienation, and his struggle with the half-formed wraith did not represent his attempt to wrench it into existence. On the contrary, the hands were pushing, not tugging, intent on forcing the creature back into the oblivion from which it had come.

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**Christopher Evans** (born 1951, in South Wales) used to work in the pharmaceuticals industry before becoming a writer almost a decade ago. His novels include *The Insider* (1981) and *In Limbo* (1985). Along with Robert Holdstock, he is the editor of the sf anthology *Other Edens* (Unwin, 1987). This is the first time he has contributed to *Interzone*. The above story, which may be the first of a series, will appear along with an account of its genesis in his forthcoming book *Writing Science Fiction* (A. & C. Black).

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COSMOGONY AND COSMOLOGY

# Mutant Popcorn

## Film Reviews by Nick Lowe

Christmas is traditionally the season when the US studios dump crate-loads of the year's failed blockbusters into the UK release schedules, on the shrewd enough reckoning that for six weeks of each year the cultural taste-buds of a mighty people go into profound hibernation, only to wake up on Twelfth Night with stacks of Rick Astley records and inexplicable boardgames they can't remember ever having wanted. This is the time of the year to watch *Masters of the Universe* (killing fun if the audience is right), *Bigfoot and the Hendersons* (woeful), or in grave desperation *Spaceballs*. (I've always found Mel Brooks' archaic gag movies pretty grim stuff, but this is the first that actually sounds like its script was lifted from a Mad magazine parody circa 1978: reflex jokes at wearily obvious targets, panel-by-panel dialogue with an exclamation at the end of each balloon.) But there's always one seasonal offload that lay down and died transatlantic simply because it was too quirky, too patchy, or too far off the wall to plumb the necessary common denominators; and the odds are even it's another Joe Dante film.

*Innerspace*, of course, is the lovingly ludicrous tribute to *Fantastic Voyage* in which the miniaturized submarine finds itself injected not into an injured scientist's brain but into the bum of a supermarket attendant. Felicitously enough, it coincides with Dr Asimov's own back-handed homage to the original, as he continues the immolation of his best-loved works with a leaden update of the 1966 novelization. As you might expect from past form, the Dante is the one that shows a real affection for the genre and the sixties sense of gosh that the original so beautifully captures. Growing in appeal the more it dates, *Fantastic Voyage* seems more and more the perfect sixties movie: a period blend of cold war politics, technological chic (nuclear subs, lasers, miracle surgery), and psychedelic exploration of the inner self, all lavishly decked out with comic-book dialogue, Raquel Welch, and amazing bubble-lamp production design. The one incongruous element is that its

initial concept is actually one of the few authentically original and breathtaking ideas ever launched in a big-budget fantasy movie. In short, it's ideal material for the opportunistic Dante blend of nostalgia, wide-eye fantasy and poorly-disciplined wackiness.

More so even than most Dante, *Innerspace* is a sublimely idiotic film by any standards, and gambles a lot on seducing its audience early on by sheer accumulation of absurdity. Dennis Quaid brings his usual sensitivity and grace of nuance to the loudmouthed alcoholic test pilot marooned in the bloodstream of nerdy checkout boy Martin Short, as both get embroiled in a chase'n'caper espionage plot with all the structure and resilience of a Mr Kipling sponge. Along the way Short gets a crash course in assertiveness and Quaid makes up with his feisty reporter girlfriend, culminating in a plot twist so desperate it strains a credulity you didn't think you had left. It's a lot to sustain on momentum and silliness alone, but this is home territory to Dante, and the film gains a lot of sympathy from strapping Quaid into a four-foot box for most of his part and leaving Short (the nice surprise in *Three Amigos!*) to shoulder the main work. In-joke nods at the original abound, and the script makes

exhilaratingly short shrift of the few logical constraints observed by its more sober model. Above all, it has the distinctive Dante touch of ghastly consumer mayhem, especially in the early supermarket and mall scenes. It also, predictably enough, suffers from some increasingly characteristic Dante vices: erratic pacing, gratuitous set-pieces against the narrative grain, awkward open-ended coda, inane music sequences (this is not a picture Sam Cooke would have been grateful for), and recurrent attacks of serious dumbness throughout. Stateside business was lukewarm; I only hope we'll prove less discriminating.

In all, it was another pretty good year for sf movies, and another disastrous year for sf films. Two pictures summed it up between them, both coincidentally marking the genre débuts of European arthouse veterans, but at opposite extremes of budget and commerciality on opposite sides of the ocean. It says a lot about the present state of fantasy cinema that the one that aims low, spends high, and exploits its audience ruthlessly is the easier work to admire, but let's hold a while on the shoestring number first. *Friendship's Death* is the first solo feature from Peter Wollen, so active in the seventies as critic, screenwriter, and enfant terrible (as the film

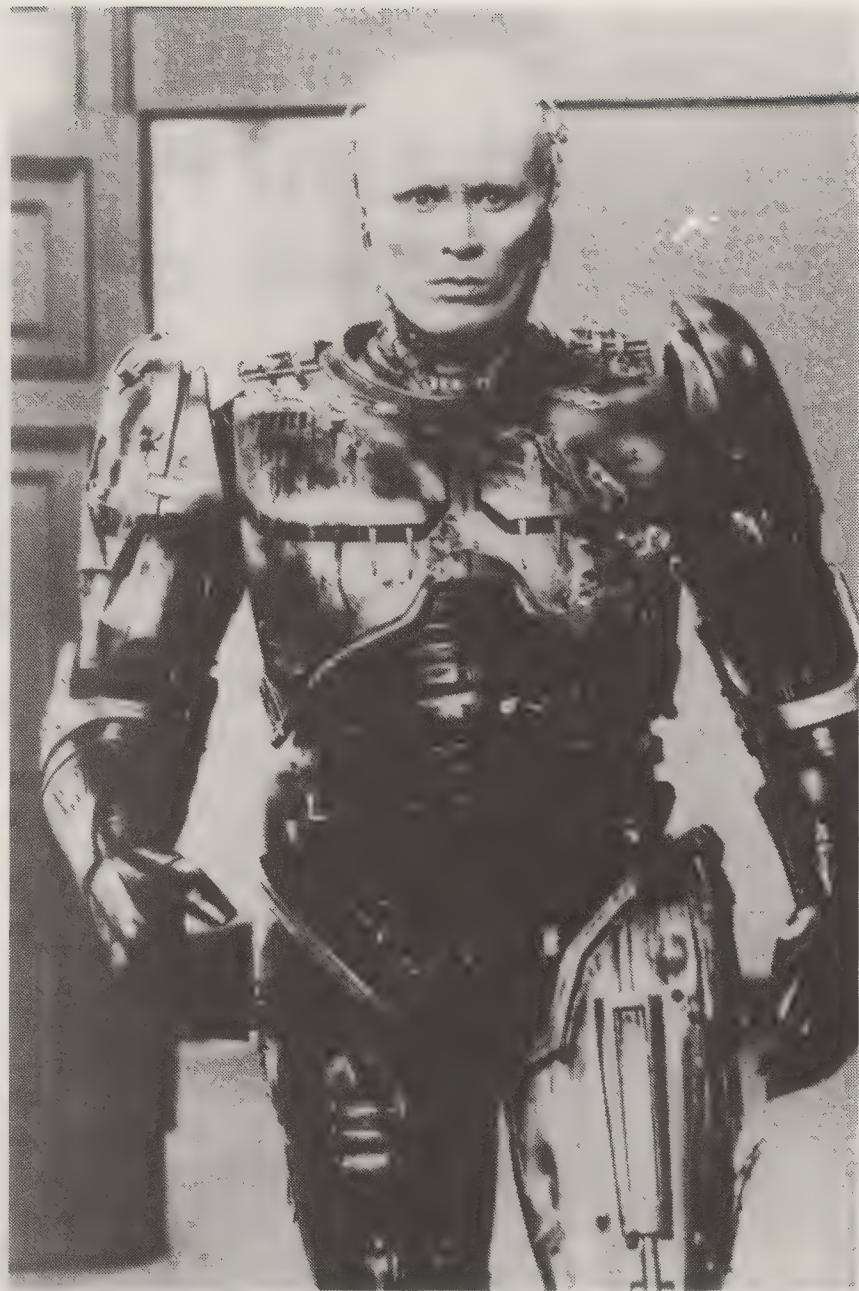


From 'Innerspace'

establishment liked to call structuralists in those days), and later as codirector of a series of variously infuriating feature films with longtime collaborator Laura Mulvey. Since their rather unhappy video translation of Emma Tennant's *The Bad Sister* for the first Film on Four season, Wollen has been limited to short subjects, and the BFI-produced *Friendship's Death* has perhaps suffered as a project from overlong gestation. The film derives from a much better short story first published (by Tennant) in *Bananas* in the mid-seventies, and rooted in Wollen's own experiences reporting on the Jordanian war in 1970. In the story, a PLO-sympathetic British journalist in Amman falls in with a man calling himself Friendship and claiming to be a robot emissary from an alien civilization whose mission to MIT had landed disastrously off-target. The journalist, sceptical at first, finds himself progressively intrigued by Friendship's bizarre perception of the human universe of language, desire, and self-definition, as the displaced environment of war-torn Amman begins to erode his programmed mission. Finally his introspective crisis resolves in a strong identification with the Palestinian cause: Friendship joins the PLO as a volunteer, and is presumed killed by the Jordanian recapture of the city. He leaves behind, as the journalist's sole evidence of his existence, a strangely robotic non-translation of Mallarmé, with which the story ends.

The original story has obvious affinities with two major films of the early seventies: Antonioni's *The Passenger*, which Wollen co-wrote, and Roeg's *Man Who Fell to Earth*. In

translating it to the screen, Wollen has wisely distanced his film from any reminiscence of either, aiming for a virtuoso chamber epic in which the entire war, and in a sense the entire human species, is viewed from the window of a besieged hotel room. Friendship is this time a young woman, the unfilmable and rather silly Mallarmé coda is replaced by a transcript of alien fieldnotes, and a contemporary epilogue reviews the traumatic events of Autumn 1970 with a suitably melancholic sense of lessons unlearned. But the film remains, like its *Bananas* contemporary *The Company of Wolves*, a misconceived project in almost every respect. The story "Friendship's Death" had no dialogue, no developed scenes, just a bald first-person narrative full of judicious uncertainties and ambiguities of detail. *Friendship's Death* the movie consists instead of a camera watching two people talking, and the change is disastrous. Two persistent problems with Wollen's previous features have been his weakness in writing dialogue and his inability to direct actors, and



From 'Robo Cop'

on the evidence here not a lot has changed. Wollen is an ingenious man, and his film constructs a clever network of correspondence between the Palestinian politics, Friendship's predicament, and larger theoretical questions of human nature and identity. But everything is spelled out, over and over, where the poetry of suggestion would be amply sufficient. When Friendship announces near the end of the film "I haven't had time to tell you my theory of the relationship between bipedalism and the suppression of women," you feel one time too often you're in the power of an author who doesn't know when to chuck an idea away; and a script so remorselessly heavy on explicit abstraction is the death of a thousand tiny needles to its hapless performers. The last Mulvey-Wollen theatrical feature *Crystal Gazing* was mainly notable for an astonishing quasi-performance by the punk sax

goddess Lora Logic, who promptly turned Krishna on the film's release. Here even Bill Paterson, who under normal conditions could make the ingredients off a Weetabix packet sound like Chekhov, has trouble bringing a Wollen script to convincing life, and poor Tilda Swinton is just an embarrassment. If the part can be played by any human being, which I doubt, it seems to invite some kind of enigmatic screen goddess, which Swinton unfortunately is not, for all her resilience in surviving three Jarman films and still remaining employable. Perhaps more seriously, the film's use of genre is squirmingly naive, combining antique sf clichés with the kind of cod-scientific technical explanation mainstream movies realize you just can't get away with nowadays. Anachronistic references (by the Paterson character) to cloning and chip technology jostle with zim-

mer-frame stuff about sexless computer civilizations and how all the higher cultures of the galaxy are terribly concerned about our warlike race destroying itself. It wouldn't be so bad, perhaps, if this wasn't a serious film about serious history and some genuinely difficult politics. You either have to be very seventies or very mad to think Middle Eastern politics and pop semiotics belong in the same film. I don't see anyone standing up in the UN to explain that the root of the Palestinian problem is that they've been decontextualized.

In a curious way, you'll find more real political nous in the film that's made the biggest dent in the year's genre boxoffice, for all it's a cynical big-budget action spectacular of exceptional sadism and speed. *RoboCop* is an intelligent, nasty satirical thriller with a shrewd sense of audience and technique, building its appeal on the Rambo mythology at the same time as it dismantles it from within. A weird meld of Judge Dredd with *Hill Street Blues*, *RoboCop* offers an early-nineties world in which SDI is deployed (with a throwaway glitch that takes out Santa Barbara), white South Africa is a nuclear fortress, and the city of Detroit has privatized its police force. Early attempts to improve the alarming fatality rate among officers through innovative technology go disastrously awry, and as a fallback the latest victim (Peter Weller, ex-Buckaroo

Banzai) is reanimated as a prototype bionic supercop. At first things go well: his memory wiped, his body a walking tank, Weller functions as a perfect law-enforcement machine. But as he pursues the chain of corruption from small fry to bigger, he finds himself taking on more than his makers intended. Meanwhile, he becomes troubled by recurrent traumatic glimpses of his stolen human memory, and begins to struggle against the system that made him...

The first thing to say about *RoboCop* is that it's an extraordinarily violent film, far more so than anything comparable in its genre. Many punters will find this exhilarating, and many will find it merely sickening. Neither is at all what the film is after, though obviously there's a difficult tightrope of taste to be negotiated here. There are certainly moments when rascally characters meet deservedly gruesome and lingering ends, but the film is very careful to attribute all its premeditated brutality to the bad guys, to such an extent that a real and unresolved narrative imbalance results. Weller's protracted, sadistic execution by the psychos early in the film is so stomach-inverting, and so unexpected out of its natural schlock-horror genre, that it gives a momentum to the revenge plot that the relatively anticlimactic, minimum-force death of the lead nasty at the end of the film can't hope to satisfy. But that, I can't help feeling, is the audience's problem, not the film's.

Otherwise, the violence is an essential part of the texture of its world, and that texture is the film's great strength: a brutal, hairtrigger future on the edge of self-destruction, driven by the boardroom politics of corporations and governments unconcerned with the street-level lives of the citizens. While a lot of the credit must go to the witty and pointed script, much too is due to the distinctive black irony of the amazing Dutch director Paul Verhoeven in this, his second English-language feature after the undervalued essay in sword-and-sorcery *Verité Flesh + Blood*. It would be absurd to credit Verhoeven, of all people, with some kind of moral crusade, and in the end I'm not sure the political satire is anything more than a meretricious pretext for some high-adrenalin blow-'em-away comic capers. But the casual nastiness towards his characters that so identifies Verhoeven's touch is well at home in the cynical consumerverse revealed in *RoboCop*'s superb dry snippets of ghastly adverts, newscasts, and ratings winners: a very eighties nightmare, and at the same time a very Verhoeven vision. It's hard to think of another figure who's made the transition from European art-house auteur to Hollywood studio whiz with such cheerful versatility and so little loss of individuality; nor, for that matter, of another recent sf movie that's given so many punters precisely the cinema they deserve.

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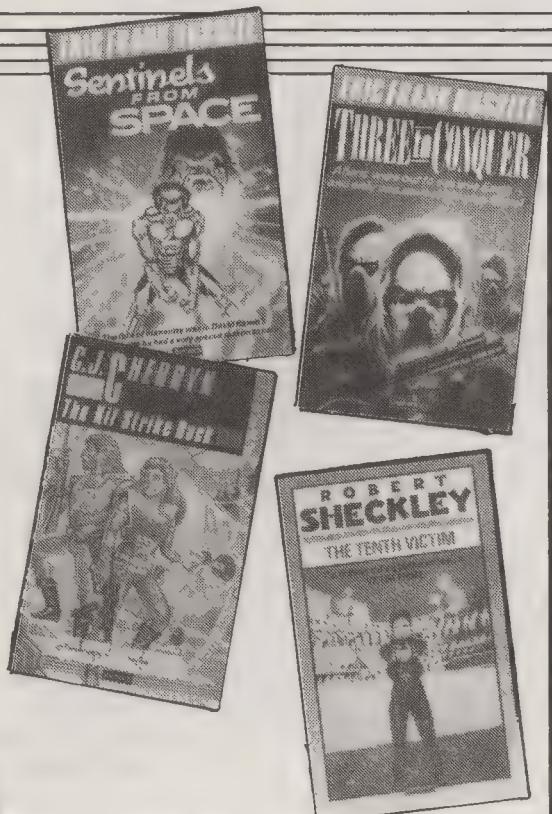
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PAPERBACKS

# Kim Newman

## Famous Monsters

You know, I wouldn't be doing this picture if it weren't for Chaney Junior's liver. In all the obits, they said it was a heart attack, but anyone who knew Lon knows better. Doing all these interviews with the old-timers, you must have heard the stories. They don't tell the half of it. I didn't get to work with Lon till well past his prime. Past my prime too, come to that. It was some Abbott and Costello piece of shit in the 50s. Already, he looked less human than I do. Wattles, gut, nose, the whole fright mask. And the stink. Hell, but he was a good old bastard. Him and me and Brod Crawford used to hit all the bars on the Strip Friday and Saturday nights. We used to scare up a commotion, I can tell you. I guess we were a disgrace. I quit all that after I got a tentacle shortened in a brawl with some hophead beatniks over on Hollywood Boulevard. I leaked ichor all over Arthur Kennedy's star. That's all gone now, anyway. There aren't any bars left I can use. It's not that they won't serve me – the Second War of the Worlds was, like, twenty-five years ago now, and that's all forgotten – but no one stocks the stuff any more. It's easy enough to get. Abattoirs sell off their leavings for five cents a gallon. But this California heat makes it go rancid and rubbery inside a day.

Anyway, just before Lon conked out – halfway through a bottle of Wild Turkey, natch – he signed up with Al to do this picture. It was called *The Mutilation Machine* back then. It's *Blood of the Cannibal Creature* now. Al will change it. He always does. The footage with Scott Brady and the bike gang is from some dodo Al never got finished in the 60s. Something a-Go-Go? Lousy title. *Cycle Sadists a-Go-Go*, that's it. It must be great being a film historian, huh? What with all this confusion and crapola? Do you know how they were paying Lon? Bottles. When Al wanted him to walk across a room in a scene, he'd have the assistant director hold up a bottle of hooch off-camera and shake it. Lon would careen across the set, knocking things and people over, and go for the

booze, and Al would get his shot. I don't suppose I'm all that much better off. One of the backers is a wholesale butcher, and he's kicking in my fee in pig blood. I know you think that sounds disgusting, but don't knock it until you've tried it.

For a while, it looked like Lon would last out the picture. Al got the scene where he's supposed to pull this kootch-kootch dancer's guts out. He was playing Groton the Mad Zombie, by the way. So it's not Chekhov. Al has already cut the scene together. Okay, so there's some scratching on the neg. Al can fix it. He's going to put on some more scratches, and make them look like sparks flying out of Lon. Groton is supposed to be electric. Or atomic. One or the other. The girl keeps laughing while Lon gets his mitts inside her sweater, but they can dub some screams in, and music and growling and it'll be okay. At least, it'll be as okay as anything ever is in Al's movies. Did you catch *Five Bloody Graves*? It was a piece of shit. After this, he wants to do a picture with Georgina Spelvin and The Ritz Brothers called *The Fucking Stewardesses*. You can bet he'll change that title.

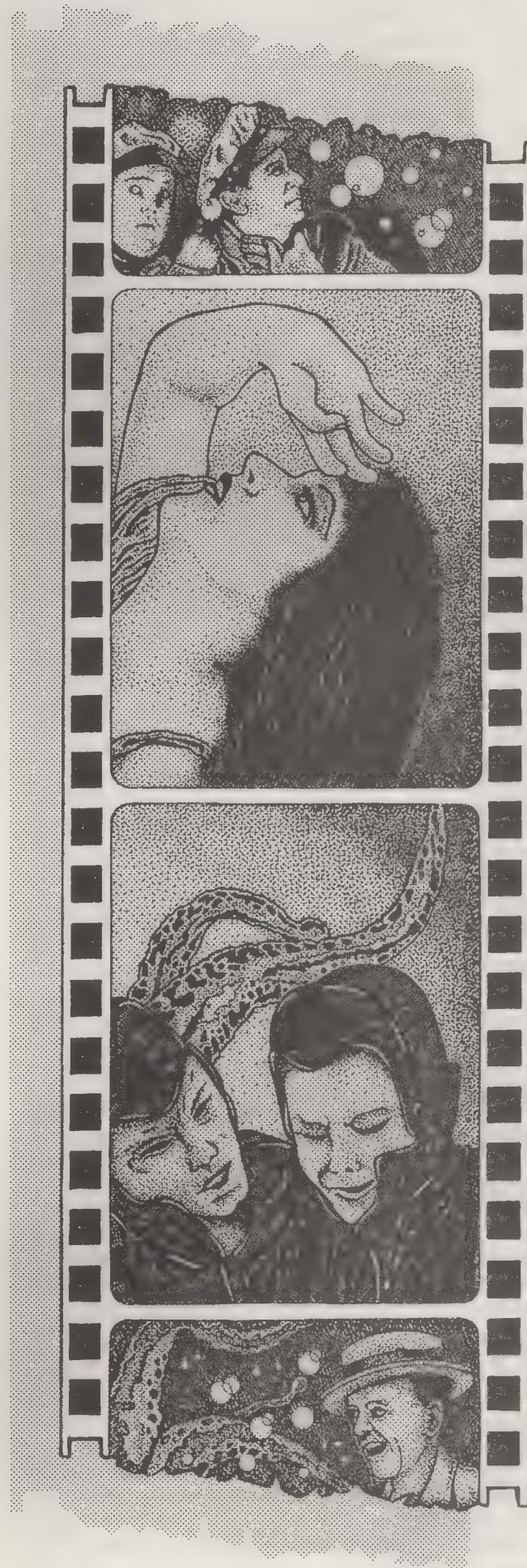
But one scene is all there is of Lon. So, when he buys the farm Al calls me up. I don't have an agent any more, although I used to be with the William Morris crowd. I do all my deals myself. I couldn't do a worse job than some of the people in this business. I used to be handled by a guy called Dickie Nixon, a real sleazo scumbag. He was the one who landed me in *Orbit Jocks*, and screwed me out of my TV residuals. Anyway, I know Al. I worked for him once before, on *Johnny Blood Rides Roughshod*. That was the horror western that was supposed to put James Dean back on the top. What a joke. The fat freak kept falling off his horse. It turned out to be a piece of shit. Al and me worked something out on this one, and so here I am in Bronson Caverns again, playing Groton the Mad Zombie. They've rewritten the script so I can be Lon in all the early scenes. I know it sounds ridiculous, what with the shape and everything. But, hell, I can

cram myself into a pair and a half of jeans and a double-size poncho. In the new script, my character is a Martian — I mean, I can't play an Eskimo, can I? — but when John Carradine zaps me with the Mutilation Machine I turn into a human being. Well, into Groton the Mad Zombie. It's the most challenging part that's come my way in years, even if the film is going to be a total piece of shit. I'm hoping my performance will be a tribute to Lon. I've got the voice down. "George, lookit duh rabbits, George." Now, I working on the walk. That's difficult. You people walk all weird. No matter how long I hang around you, I still can't figure out how you manage with just the two legs.

I'm an American citizen, by the way. I was hatched in Los Angeles. Put it down to the Melting Pot. Mom flopped down in the 20s, when the Old World political situation started going to hell. She'd been through WW I and couldn't face that again. It's in the culture, I guess. When your head of government is called the High War Victor you know you're in trouble. I'm not that way. I'm mellow. A typical native Californian, like my twenty-eight brood siblings. I'm the only one of us left now. The rest all died off or went back to the skies. I can't let go. It's showbiz, you know. It's in the ichor. You must understand that if you do all these interviews. What do you call it, oral history? It's important, I suppose. Someone should take all this down before we all die out. Did you get to Rathbone? There was a guy with some stories. I never got on with him though, despite all those pictures we did together. He lost some relatives in the First War of the Worlds, and never got around to accepting that not all non-terrestrials were vicious thugs.

I suppose you'll want to know how I got into the movies? Well, I'm that one in a million who started as an extra. It was in the late 30s, when I'd barely brushed the eggshell out of my slime. Four bucks a day just for hanging around cardboard nightclubs or walking up and down that street where the buildings are just frontages. In *Swing Time*, I'm in the background when Fred and Ginger do their "Pick Yourself Up" routine. They were swell, although Rogers put my name down on some list of communist sympathizers in the 50s and I nearly had to go before HUAC. Do I look like a commie? Hell, how many other Americans can blush red, white and blue? I didn't stay an extra long. I suppose I'm noticeable. There were very few of us in Hollywood, and so I started getting bit parts. Typically, I'd be a heavy in a saloon fight, or an underworld hanger-on. If you catch *The Roaring Twenties* on a re-run, look out for me during the massacre in the Italian restaurant. Cagney gets me in the back. It's one of my best deaths. I've always been good at dying.

My big break came when 20th Century-Fox did the Willie K'ssth films. Remember? Rathbone played Inspector Willie K'ssth of the Selenite Police Force. *Willie K'ssth Takes Over*, *Willie K'ssth and The Co-Eds*, *Willie K'ssth On Broadway*, and so on. There were more than twenty of them. I was Jimbo, Willie's big, dumb Martian sidekick. I did all the comedy relief scenes — going into a tentacle-flapping fright in haunted houses, getting hit on the head and seeing animated stars in fight sequences. The films don't



play much now, because of the Selenite pressure groups. They hate the idea of a human actor in the role. And when Earl Derr Biggers was writing the books in the 20s, the Grand Lunar had them banned on the Moon. I don't see what they were bothered about. Willie always spots the killer and comes out on top. He usually gets to make a bunch of human beings look ridiculous as well. In not one of the books or movies did Jimbo ever guess who the murderer was, even when it was blatantly obvious. And it usually was. For a while, I was typed as the dumb, scared Martie. Some of my siblings said I was projecting a negative image of the race, but there was a Depression on and I was the only one of the brood in regular work. I've got nothing against Selenites, by the way, although the Grand Lunar has always had a rotten Sapient Rights record. It's no wonder so many of them headed for the Earth.

After the New York Singe, I was quickly dropped from the series. We were half-way through shooting Willie K'ssth on Coney Island when the studio quietly pulled my contract. They rewrote Jimbo as a black chauffeur called Wilbur Wolverhampton and got Stepin Fetchit to do the role. They still put out the film under its original title, even though there wasn't a Coney Island any more. I'd have sued, but there was a wave of virulent Anti-Martian feeling sweeping the country. That was understandable, I guess. I had relatives in New York, too. Suddenly, forty years of cultural exchange was out of the porthole and we were back to interspecial hatred. Nobody cared that Mom was a refugee from High War Victor Uszthay in the first place, and that since his purges most of her brood siblings were clogging up the canals. I was pulled out of my apartment by the Beverly Hills cops and roughed up in a basement. They really did use rubber hoses. I'll never forget that. I ended up in an internment camp, and the studio annexed my earnings. The hate mail was really nasty. We were out in the desert, which wasn't so bad. I guess we're built for deserts. But at night people in hoods would come and have bonfires just outside the perimeter. They burned scarecrows made to look like Martians and chanted lots of blood and guts slogans. That was disturbing. And the guards were a bit free with the cattle prods. It was a shameful chapter in the planet's history, but no one's researched it properly yet. The last interview I did was with some Martian-American professor doing a thesis on Roosevelt's treatment of so-called "enemy aliens." He was practically a hatchling, and didn't really understand what we'd had to go through. I bet his thesis will be a piece of shit. There were rumours about this camp in Nevada where the guards stood back and let a mob raze the place to the ground with the Marties still in it. And who knows what happened in Europe and Asia?

**T**hen the cylinders started falling, and the war effort got going. Uszthay must have been a bigger fool than we took him for. With Mars' limited resources, he couldn't possibly keep the attack going for more than six months. And Earth had favorite, while he was still using 19th century rocket cannons. Do you know how many cylinders just landed in the sea and sunk? So, Roosevelt got together with the world leaders in Iceland – Hitler, Stalin,

Oswald Cabal – and they geared up for Earth's counter-invasion. Finally, I got all the hassles with my citizenship sorted out, and the authorities reluctantly admitted I had as much right to be called an American as any other second generation immigrant. I had to carry a wad of documentation the size of a phone book, but I could walk the streets freely. Of course, if I did I was still likely to get stoned. I did most of my travelling in a curtained car. According to what was left of my contract, I owed 20th a couple of movies. I assumed they'd pay me off and I'd wind up in an armaments factory, but no, as soon as I was on the lot I was handed a stack of scripts. Suddenly, everyone was making war pictures.

The first was *Mars Force*, which I did for Howard Hawks. I was loaned to Warners for that. It was supposed to be a true story. I don't know if you remember, but the week after the Singe a handful of foolhardy volunteers climbed into their Cavor Balls and buzzed the red planet. They didn't do much damage, but it was Earth's first retaliative strike. In the movie, they were after the factories where the elements for the heat rays were being synthesized. In real life, they just flattened a couple of retirement nests and got rayed down. In *Mars Force*, I plated the tyrannical Security Victor at the factories. I spent most of the film gloating over a crystal-scope, looking at stock footage of the smoking plains where New York used to be. I also got to drool over a skinny terrestrial missionary, snivel in fear as the brave Earthmen flew over in their Christmas tree ornaments and be machine-gunned to death by John Garfield. It was typical propaganda shit, but it was a pretty good picture. It stands up a lot better than most of the other things I did back then.

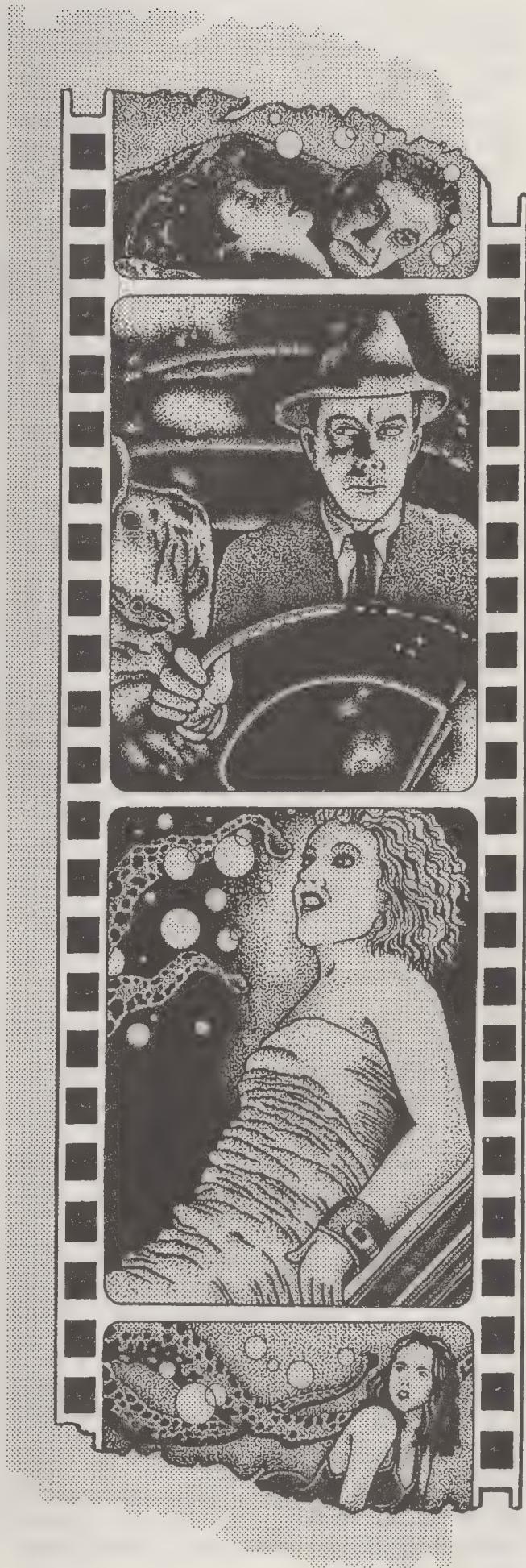
I was typecast for the rest of the war. I've raped more nurses than any actor alive – although what I was supposed to see in you sandpaper-skinned bipeds is beyond me. And I did a lot of plotting, scheming, saluting, backstabbing, bombing, blasting, cackling, betraying, sneering and strutting. I saw more action than Patton and Rommel put together, and without ever stepping off the backlots. The furthest I ever went for a battle was Griffith Park. I had a whole set of shiny, slimy uniforms. I played every rank we had going. In *Heat Ray!*, I even got to play Uszthay, although that's like asking Mickey Mouse to play John the Baptist. I soon lost count of the number of times I had to swear to crush the puny planet Earth in my lesser tentacles. I got killed a lot. I was shot by Errol Flynn in *Desperate Journey*, bombed by Spencer Tracy in *Thirty Seconds Over Krba-Gnsk*, and John Wayne got me in *Soaring Tigers*, *The Sands of Grlshnk* and *The Fighting Seabees*. In *Lunaria*, Bogart plugs me as I reach for the crystalphone on the launch-field. Remember that one? Everyone says it's a classic. It got the Academy Award that year. Claude Rains asks Bogart why he came to Lunaria, and Bogart says he came for the atmosphere. "But there's no atmosphere on the Moon," says Rains. "I was misinformed." I wanted the role of the freedom fighter who floats off to Earth with Ingrid Bergman at the end, but Jack Warner chickened out of depicting a sympathetic Martie and they made the character into a Selenite. Paul Henried could never keep his antennae straight. I had to make do with being another Inferior War

Victor. No one believed there were any anti-Uszthay Martians. That's typical earthbound thinking.

**T**hen the war ended, and suddenly there were no more Martian roles. In fact, suddenly there were no more Martians period. The allies did a pretty fair job of depopulating the old planet. Since then, we've been a dying race. We're feeble, really. Every time the 'flu goes round, I have to go to funerals. There was a rash of anti-war movies. There always is after the zapping is over. Remember *A Walk in the Dust* or *Terrestrial Invaders*? I didn't get work in those. All you ever saw of the Martian troops were bodies. There were plenty of newsreel scenes of big-eyed orphans waving their tentacles at the camera in front of the sludging ruins of their nests. Those movies didn't do any business. The whole solar system was tired of war. They started making musicals. I can't do what you people call dancing, so those were lean years. I did a bit of investing, and set up my own business. I thought I'd hit on the ideal combination. I opened a Martian bar and a kosher butcher's shop back-to-back. The Jews got the meat, and the Marties got the drainings. It was a good idea, and we did okay until the riots. I lost everything then, and went back to acting.

I did some dinner theatre. Small roles. I thought my best performance was as Dr Chasuble in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, but there weren't many managements willing to cast me in spite, rather than because, of my race. I tried to get the backing to put on *Othello* in modern dress with the Moor as a Martian, but no one was interested. When Stanley Kramer bought up *Worlds Apart*, the hot best-seller about the persecution of Martians on Earth, I put in a bid for the lead, but Stanley had to say no. By then, I was too associated with the stereotype Jimbo Martie. He said audiences wouldn't take me seriously. Maybe he was right, but I'd have liked to take a shot at it. As you must know, Ptyehshdneh got the part and went on to be the first non-terrestrial to walk off with the Best Actor statuette on Oscar night. I'm not bitter, but I can't help thinking that my career in the last twenty years would have been very different if Kramer had taken the chance. Ptyeh' is such a pretty Martie, if you know what I mean. Not much slime on his hide.

Of course, Willie K'ssth came back on television in the early 50s. They made twenty-six half-hour episodes with Tom Conway under the beak and me back as dumb Jimbo. The series is still in syndication on graveyard shift TV. I get fan mail from nostalgia-buff insomniacs and night watchmen all over the country. It's nice to know people notice you. I saw one of those episodes recently. It was a piece of shit. But at the time it was a job, right? It didn't last long, and I was more or less on the skids for a couple of years. I was on relief between guest spots. I'm in a classic *Sergeant Bilko*, where they're trying to make a movie about the canal Bilko is supposed to have taken in the war. Doberman wins a Dream Date With a Movie Star in a contest and all the platoon try to get the ticket off him. Finally, Bilko gets the ticket and turns up at the Hollywood nightspot, and I turn out to be the Dream Date Star. Phil Silvers has a terrific talent, and it was nice just to be funny for a change. We worked out a good little routine with the drinks



and the cocktail umbrellas. I'd like to have done more comedy, but when you've got tentacles producers don't think you can milk a laugh. I popped out of a box on *Laugh-In* once.

The 60s were rough, I guess. I had a little bit of a drink problem, but you must have heard about that. You've done your research, right? Well, skipping the messy parts of the story, I ended up in jail. It was only a couple of cows all told, but I exsanguinated them all right. No excuses. Inside, I got involved in the protest movement. I was in with lots of draft evaders. They gave me some LSD, and I wound up signing a lot of petitions and, outside, going on plenty of marches. Hell, everybody now thinks the War on Mercury was a waste of time, but the planet was gung-ho about it back then. Those little jelly-breathers never did anyone any harm, but you'd creamed one planet and got a taste for it. That's what I think. I did a bit of organizational work for the Aliens' League, and spoke on campuses. I was on President Kissinger's enemies list. I'm still proud of that.

I had a few film roles while all this was going in. Nothing spectacular, but I kept my face on the screen. I was the priest in *The Miracle of Mare Nostrum*, Elvis' partner in the spear-fishing business in *She Ain't Human*, and Doris Day's old boyfriend in *With Six You Get Eggroll*. The films were mostly pieces of shit. I'm unbilled in a couple of Sinatra-Martin movies because I knocked around with the Rat Pack for a couple of summers before I got politics. I get a tentacle down Angie Dickinson's decolleté in *Ocean's 11*. I know you're going to ask me about *Orbit Jocks*. I was just naive. Again, no excuses. When I shot my scenes, I thought it was a documentary. They had a whole fake script and everything. I took the job because of the trip to Mars. I'd never been before, and I wanted to discover my roots. I stood in front of landmarks reading out stuff about history. Then the producers sliced in all the hardcore stuff later. I don't know if you've seen the film, but the Martian in all the sex scenes is not me. It's hard to tell with a steel cowl, but he's got all his tentacles.

I'm not retired. I won't retire until they plough me under. But I'm being more selective. I'll take a picture if I can pal around with any of the other old-timers. I was in something called *Vampire Coyotes* last year, with Leslie Howard, Jean Harlow and Sidney Greenstreet. I don't mind working on low-budget horror movies. It's more like the old days. The big studios these days are just cranking out bland television crap. I was asked to be a guest villain on *Columbo*, but I turned it down and they got Robert Culp instead. I went to a science fiction film convention last year. Forrest J. Ackerman interviewed me on stage. He's a great guy. When I finally turn tentacles-up, I'm having it in my will that I be stuffed and put in his basement with the *Creature From the Black Lagoon* and all that other neat stuff. Lon would have gone for that too, but humans are prejudiced against auto-icons. It's a pity. I hope Forry can make do with just Lon's liver. It was the heart and soul of the man, anyway.

After this, I've got a three-picture deal with Al. That's not as big a thing as it sounds, since he'll shoot them simultaneously. *Blood of the Brain Eaters*,

*Jessie's Girls* and *Martian Exorcist*. Then, I might go to the Philippines and make this movie they want me to do with Nancy Kwan. Okay, so it'll be a piece of shit...

If I had it all over again, do you know what? I'd do everything different. For a start, I'd take dancing lessons...

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**Kim Newman** (born 1959) is a film critic for late-night television and for various magazines. His last story here, the wickedly funny "Next-But-One Man" (IZ 19), proved very popular with our readers.

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# S.M. Baxter

## Something for Nothing

**W**e drifted beside the alien ship. Bluish stars streamed towards us at half the speed of light.

"Fantastic," Harris rumbled. "Nothing I like more than something for nothing." His massive frame floated upside down before a computer terminal.

George and I had our noses jammed up against a viewport. "Yes, fantastic," breathed George. I turned and stared at his gaunt profile. "A windfall for the whole human race," he said.

"I don't believe it," I said. "You two haven't agreed on any damn thing since the three of us climbed into this box six months ago —"

But Harris was glaring at George's skinny neck. "What's the human race got to do with my overtime payments?"

And that was it. George fluttered away from the port; Harris loomed over him. "Wasting processing time on trivialities..." "...time and a half or double time..." And so it went.

Of course, Harris had a point — it was just the viciousness of his argument. We were the fastest humans in history. Thanks to Einstein time passed thirteen percent slower for us than for the folks back home.

"We're like Apollo 11," mused George. "Entering unexplored velocity realms..."

"There's no precedent in law for overtime payments under relativistic time dilation conditions," boomed Harris. "I'm keeping a speed log on the computer, and if you're thinking of deleting it—" He waved a huge fist.

"Always looking for something for nothing, aren't you?" George sneered.

And so on. Sometimes I wondered if we'd all survive the trip...

A warning buzzed. The argument paused and we grabbed handholds. Our ship was a monstrous magnetic bell topped by a lifepod. A small fusion bomb went off inside the bell, and the floor slammed against our feet.

When I turned back to the port, we'd jerked a little closer to our rendezvous. Our ship worked — we'd managed to catch up with the mysterious alien as it arced past the solar system — but it was like riding a plummeting lift, and it had had us at each other's throats since the first month.

I rubbed my bruised feet. George and Harris got back to their argument. What a life, I thought gloomily, and got a coffee.

**W**e prepared for rendezvous, still bickering. Sol was a redshifted blur an eighth of a light year away. The alien ship was no bigger than our lifepod. It looked smoothed by age, like an old brain. We secured a line.

George flapped gingerly around what looked like a port in the melted-looking hull; Harris headed for what had to be a drive tube.

And me? Remember Mike Collins — the sap who'd stayed in orbit while Neil and Buzz got the glory on the Moon? I'm a historian and linguist; I wouldn't get to leave the ship unless real-life aliens opened the hatch and shook George by the hand — or maybe the throat. When they didn't I took time out to clean the coffee percolator. It's amazing how the grounds collect.

I heard George panting as he worked. Then he gasped. I saw him tumble awkwardly into space as a panel lifted out and aside from the alien hull. "Ha!" George exulted. "Did you get that?"

"Yah," I said. "Congratulations."

"There was a magnetic lock embedded in the hull. A prime-number code. Designed to be opened by intelligence, not by accident."

From around the curve of the vessel Harris muttered: "But you managed it. So where did they mess up?"

"Do you want to repeat that?" George snapped.

"What do you see in there?" I said hastily.

George poked a torch inside the hatchway. "No life.

A single cabin about the size of ours. Airless, empty except for three items. An array of what look like crystal cubes – a data bank? A sort of flask set on a pillar. And something like an old-fashioned cathode ray tube, set into a control panel. It's all got the smoothed-over look of the ship's exterior. Stand by..."

His feet followed him into the hatch. "Take it easy, George..."

"I can confirm this is a drive tube," Harris growled. His instruments were arrayed around a circular mesh set in the hill. "It's an ion drive. Nothing fancy. This is a high voltage grid, and it's operating now. The acceleration's about half of a thousandth of a gee."

I tried a joke. "So don't get shaken loose." I got ignored. Harris collected up his instruments in silence. Harris was our professional astronaut; he had flight experience going back to the last days of the old space shuttle. And the point of a flight for him was the money, the fame and what they would buy him. "Do you want to think about that acceleration for a while?" he asked coldly.

"Ah –"

"It looks like there's a couple of attitude jets around the hill," he said. He swept confidently over the alien's starlit curves.

I finnished with the percolator and turned reluctantly to the computer.

**A**fter a couple more hours they finished their EVA and drifted stiffly back into the cabin. Until you try it, it's hard to appreciate how tough it is to work in weightless conditions. Even Harris, the paragon, looked shaky. And as for George – well, he was just a physicist. His face was a mask over his coffee nipple.

Neither of them remarked how good the coffee tasted since I'd cleaned the perk, but I didn't let it bother me.

"I've worked out the consequences of the alien's acceleration," I said to Harris. "He's blasting sideways, deflecting. He's turning in a circle half a million light years wide."

Harris grunted and closed his eyes, still breathing hard. Obviously my toil at the terminal had confirmed what he'd known instinctively all alone. I was so glad.

George eyed me, still ashen. "That means nothing. It's too big. Think of it in real terms. How big's the galaxy?"

"Ah – maybe a hundred thousand light years across."

"So your turning circle's five times the size of the galaxy." He got, if anything, paler. "It's manoeuvring round the galactic core."

Harris' eyes snapped open. "You're crazy."

George shook his head weakly. "No. We assumed the alien came from a nearby star. From within our galaxy, at least. It was a reasonable guess."

"But we were wrong. It's cutting through our galaxy, on its way – somewhere else." He swallowed. "And it's in the middle of a course correction to avoid the core. It all fits in."

"A course correction on that scale," Harris said acidly, "would take maybe a million years."

"I know," George said miserably. "How could anyone think on that scale? It's appalling."

Harris looked as if he wanted to spit, but you don't

spit in zero gee. Instead he dumped his coffee and went to a terminal. He called up a three-dimensional extrapolation of the alien's path; the orange line snaked backwards from our present position and south out of our galaxy.

"What did you mean, 'it fits in'?" I asked George. "Fits in with what? What did you find out over there?"

He cuddled his coffee cup like a teddy bear. "You know the flask I mentioned? On top of a small pillar?"

"Yah."

"Guess what I found inside."

"Don't be stupid, George," Harris muttered absently.

"It was a quarter full of potassium 40. And filled up with the radioactive products of potassium 40. See? Oh, God."

"You've lost me, George," I said.

"I think it's a clock. At the start of the voyage I think it was full of potassium 40. The amount it's decayed tells us how long the ship's been travelling. It must have travelled for about two half-lives of the potassium."

My scalp crawled. "Which adds up to –"

"About two point six billion years."

I shook my head. "I can't get that into perspective, George."

"Don't try," he said dolefully. "That little ship's been travelling for half the lifetime of the Earth."

"I hate it. How could they think so big?"

"Ha!" Harris snapped. "Here's the proof that this is just another line of crap." He'd expanded the scale on his display; the alien's projected path stirred galaxies like bees. Now it lanced through what looked like a bubble in a Swiss cheese. "This is the nearby universe," Harris said. "Nearby on a scale of billions of light years anyway. The galaxies aren't spread out uniformly; there's this bubble-like structure, hollows surrounded by clusters and filaments of galaxies..."

"It's fantastic," I breathed. "How come?"

George made to answer, but Harris cut in dismissively: "Cosmology. The Big Bang, the Big Crunch, all of that. Who cares? The point is that if baldy over there is right the alien's two-billion-year flight must have taken him right through at least one bubble – this one here. See?"

He hauled himself over to George. He had a way of using his physical presence as a weapon. "You'll concede I know something about ion drives. They've been my living for twenty years."

He forced a nod out of George.

"Ion drives are efficient – but they still need reaction mass. You've always got to spit something out the back to move forward." He waved towards the viewport. "To cross a void like that, the alien would have needed a fuel tank a thousand miles wide. I can't say I noticed it. Did you?"

"Damn it, after a billion years half the hull metal should have evaporated –"

George squeezed his eyes shut and said nothing. His lips were white.

After a little more pointless cruelty Harris climbed into his sleeping sack, smirking with his triumph. George looked as if he was asleep where he drifted.

I thought of how these arguments blew up out of nowhere. Something created from nothing.

I cleared up the coffee cups.

**O**ur next interpersonal crisis came a couple of days later.

I watched from my safe distance as George hunched over the artifact that looked like a cathode ray tube. He tweaked its controls gingerly. He made notes on little labels which he stuck to the control panel. Soon the alien console was covered with bits of his spidery writing.

Harris drifted in, a microblaster in his hand.

George flapped at him, excited. "Harris, I've been doing some experiments —"

"So have I." Harris grinned slyly. "Watch." He raised the blaster and carved a piece out of the nearest wall.

George gurgled and launched himself across the cabin, a jumble of limbs. "You've no right — you've no right —" He clung to Harris' arm. Harris ignored his feathery mass. "Take a look," he said calmly.

The wall was repairing itself. Fibres extended across the scar and twisted together; the resulting patch softened down and fused. It was like watching bones knit.

George let go. Harris said: "Think what a piece of this would be worth back on Earth. If we can get hold of some of the commercial rights —"

George bristled. "Harris, you can't just hack bits off this ship."

Harris patted a suit pocket. "I already have." He laughed in George's face.

I said quickly: "This explains a lot. Why the ship looks smoothed-over — it must have been patched thousands of times. This is how it's survived two billion years."

Harris sneered. "You'd still need raw material."

George remembered his discovery; he recovered his excitement. "Yes, that's what I've found out."

Harris ignored him and adjusted his blaster.

"Back off, Harris," I said. "Let him show what he's got."

Harris shrugged theatrically. He mimicked George's ready voice. "Yes, George, let's see what you've found." And he made himself comfortable, braced against an interior strut of the alien ship. Right in the middle of the place George had been working. George waited for him to move. Harris just folded his arms.

George had to climb past him. I saw his expression.

He made sure the monitor camera could see him. He pointed to the ray tube. "This is a sort of micro-teleportation device," he said.

Harris yawned.

"Mass enters the device here — via this feed — as a beam of neutrons. Mass comes out by this feed here, as a beam of what are called W-particles."

"The mass that comes out is about ninety times what goes in."

While we thought about that he went on: "The extra mass is passed out for further processing: reaction mass for the ion drive, repair material for the hull, and so on —"

Harris got ready to say something very unpleasant. I got in first. "Run that again, George. You're saying ninety times as much mass comes out as goes in."

"Right," he said calmly.

"At the risk of sounding stupid — doesn't that violate the conservation of mass? Shouldn't that be impossible?"

George tried to scratch his cheek. His hand bumped into his faceplate. The astronaut watched him clinically.

"It's a little involved," George said. "In about fifteen minutes a free neutron in that tube will decay — it breaks up into a proton, and electron and an antineutrino."

"And mass is conserved."

"Sure. But before those products are formed the neutron emits a W-particle, which instantly breaks up into the electron and the antineutrino."

"So?" It's hard to believe Harris could get so much spite into one syllable.

"The W has about ninety times the electron's mass. No mass conservation, right? A paradox."

"But it makes no difference. Usually, the lifetime of the W is so brief that —" He struggled to stick to English. "It's within the uncertainty limits of quantum mechanics."

I hate that word 'quantum'. "You're saying that the W disappears so quickly that it doesn't really matter."

He struggled with that. "Well, no, not really," he said unhappily. "But I can't think of a better way of putting it. The point is, the aliens have found some way of catching the W's before they evaporate."

"So they create mass," I said.

"So George is a cracked teapot," said Harris. "Come on. That bull boils down to something for nothing." The practical man sneered at the scientist. "It's impossible."

I couldn't resist it. "I thought you were quite keen on something for nothing. I mean, your overtime —"

George chortled. Harris' face darkened. "Mass can't appear from nowhere," he said stubbornly.

George actually patted his head. I winced. We'd pay for this later. "Very good," George said cockily. "I believe that the mass that's extracted here must be disappearing from somewhere else in the universe, in other quantum events. As I said, it's a sort of micro-teleportation, a few grammes a day. No need for huge fuel tanks."

"In fact —" He had to reach round Harris to get to his sticky labels. "I think these are controls for moving the 'sink', the point in space from which the matter would come. You'd put it in a matter-rich place, say the heart of a star." His face clouded. "But I'm making slow progress with the controls. There are a lot of safeguards. You wouldn't want the sink within the structure of the ship, for example."

"Well, you keep at it, George," Harris said icily. "And make sure you put your pretty labels on places where I can hack this gizmo out and take it home."

George smouldered. "Look, Harris —"

"Isn't it time for your break, Harris?" I put in quickly.

He checked his watch. "Yeah. Thanks." And he closed his eyes and snuggled down to sleep, right where he was. George clambered round his massive body, jerking with frustration.

I sighed. Do you suppose Mike Collins had all this trouble with Neil and Buzz?

**I** stared at a video screen full of numbers. I was trying to make sense of the electromagnetic patterns George had recorded within the last of the three alien artifacts, the crystal arrays. To be perfectly honest it wasn't much consolation for finding the ship lifeless.

"I don't think it's my field anyway," I said to George. We floated in our sleeping sacks sipping coffee; it was the end of one of their EVA cycles. The cabin was peaceful in the absence of Harris who was still packing up. "I don't think it's text. As much as anything, it reminds me of a map of the structure of DNA."

"That fits in," he said gloomily. Knowledge seemed only to oppress him.

"With what?"

"An idea I've been forming about the ship's purpose. Have you thought about that?" He let go his coffee cup and struggled out of the sack. In his underpants he looked like a bag of bones. He began to work at one of the computer terminals.

I gathered my thoughts. "Not much," I admitted. "These people weren't much beyond us in technology. The micro-teleport device and the healing walls are within our understanding at least. And they didn't have faster-than-light travel, for instance."

"And yet they thought big," George said. "A billion years big. Harris says it would have taken the probe a thousand years just to get up to speed."

"But why? Where is it headed?" He'd called up a projection of the alien's path. The orange line arced through the smokelike bubbles and filaments of the large-scale universe. "Where were they sending a record of their equivalent of DNA – a record of what was most uniquely themselves?"

"That's just my guess about the DNA, George," I warned.

"Look at this," he said. Right at the edge of the visible universe was a dull blue blob. The orange line pierced it. "A quasar," breathed George. "A relic of the universe's birth."

I shrugged inside my sack. "So, it's a quasar probe."

His eyes were large and unhappy. "But not just any quasar. There's a theory that one day we'll identify a quasar at the site of the original Big Bang. And maybe of the Big Crunch, if it comes – the death of everything, the final collapse of the universe."

I goggled. "Could that quasar be it?"

George shrugged. "Maybe they knew something we don't."

"They're a billion years dead," he said forcefully. "But they had ambition. I believe they did their best to send a piece of themselves to the end of everything. Who knows? Maybe they thought something could survive, in some way."

I nodded slowly.

He wrapped his hands together. "I believe we've no right to interfere with this ship. We should respect the builders' memory. We can't let Harris hack of bits and take them home –"

His eyes widened. "Where is Harris?"

And he hustled to the suit cupboard.

Here we go again, I thought. I struggled out of my sack.

**H**arris was using his microblaster. He was slicing out the micro-teleportation device, severing cables and supports in a rough sphere. The alien ship was trying to repair itself but Harris could move faster. He hummed as he worked.

George crashed in. "You bastard –"

Watching from the lifepod, I shouted into their ears. "Take it easy. Hold off for a while, Harris." He kept

humming and cutting. "There's no rush. Let's talk it through."

Eventually he shrugged. "Okay." He turned off the blaster and settled into his usual place, slap in the middle of George's work area. "Let's talk." He played with the blaster, just to keep the temperature up.

George hung in the centre of the cabin for a long while, breathing deeply. Then – remarkably controlled, it seemed to me – he wormed his way round Harris to the control console of the teleport device. He faced Harris, his hands behind his back on the console. "I can't agree that you should do this," he began.

Harris' tone was sweet. "Who's going to stop me? You?"

"This ship's not ours to take apart. It's immoral." George's voice was deadly even. I noticed his arms moving slightly but I couldn't see what his hands were doing.

Harris' eyes pinned George like a cat's. He was enjoying this. "Immoral? Listen, the people who built this thing are long dead. Even their descendants must be gone, their sun folded up or nova'd. What do they care?"

"Would you smash up a gravestone to build a wall?"

Harris grinned. "Maybe. This isn't immorality. It's immortality. For all of us, when this thing's on display in the Smithsonian –"

And so it went on. Round and round, in diminishing circles, for hours. We'd had months of practice at this sort of scene. As time wore on, however, I noticed George doing a higher proportion of the talking. He argued patiently, reasonably – and totally uncharacteristically.

Harris started to look uncomfortable. He was sweating, and occasionally scratched his chest and armpit. But of course there was no question of him moving from his chosen position –

– until he gave a surprised gurgle, clutched at his chest, and folded up. George grabbed him.

Blood came from Harris' mouth in great globes that stuck to the inside of his faceplate.

**W**e wrapped Harris' body in an improvised flag and pushed it into space. I said some words. Well, he'd been a hero, once.

We began the painful process of deceleration. The first grinding fusion explosions were the worst. It would take over a year of this to get us home.

George and I drifted side by side. The cabin was embarrassingly large. We watched as the alien ship – and Harris – disappeared into the structure of the large-scale universe.

"Well, he got what he wanted," George said. "Immortality. He's heading for the Big Crunch with the alien ship; he might be all that's left of humanity when the end comes. He'll be the most famous man in the universe. What more could he ask?" He giggled. "Do you think we should send his overtime payments after him?"

"It can't have been easy overriding the safeguards," I said drily.

His head swivelled towards me. "What safeguards?"

"On the controls of the mass sink – the other end of the micro-teleport. You weren't supposed to be able to bring it inside the ship."

He quickly checked that the cabin monitors were off. "Do you want to think about what you're saying? I mean, it's possible I overrode some safeguards in my tinkering but —"

"Of course," I went on doggedly, "the hard part was keeping Harris in one place long enough for the mass loss to become significant. You handled that final scene very well. I didn't think you had so much understanding of people."

"What is this? What mass loss? Harris' heart failure was unfortunate, but the stress of the voyage —"

"The teleport device could provide just a few grammes a day, you said. Just a few grammes would be enough for the alien ship, if they came from a star's heart."

"Just a few grammes were enough for you. From Harris' heart."

He grinned like a skull. "Prove it."

The warning sounded and the floor began to slam again.

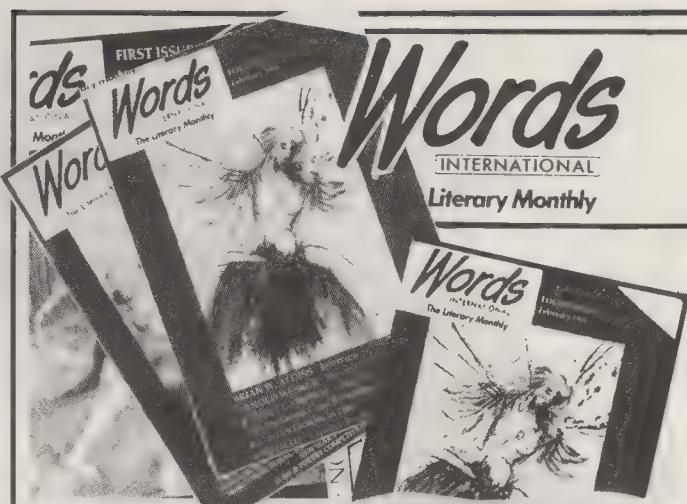
S.M. Baxter wrote "The Xeelee Flower" (IZ 19) and since then he has won a science-fiction short story competition in Jennings Magazine (Summer 1987 – available from 336 Westbourne Park Rd., London W11 1EQ at £2 a copy). But he also tells us that he has continued to add to his enormous collection of rejection slips from around the world.



THRUST 27 features Michael Bishop on underappreciated SF author Pamela Sargent; an interview with Greg Bear; Richard E. Geis appearing in his first THRUST column (with help from Alter); John Shirley with criticism of the current state of SF conventions; Gregory Benford on Fred Hoyle's contribution to the development of hard SF; Marvin Kaye on immortality; and the best book reviews anywhere; and more! Subscribe today!

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# Alfred Bester, 1913-1987

## Charles Platt

When I last saw Alfie, several years ago, he was already dismantling his life. He was selling his home on Fire Island. He was leaving his rent-controlled apartment on Madison Avenue. His long involvement with Judith McQuown had ended unhappily. His wife had died of cancer, and he was spending almost all his time in seclusion in his farmhouse in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. It was there that I went to visit him.

He took me to his local bar, warning me beforehand to expect some "red-neck racism," toward Blacks, especially. "How do they feel about Jews?" I asked him. "Did you get around to telling them that you're Jewish?"

He looked chagrined. "We will not say a word about that."

The bar was a shack on a country back road. Beers were 35 cents. The bartender served Alfie a big snifter containing at least six ounces of brandy, without being prompted to do so, and left the bottle beside the glass. The customers were the Pennsylvania equivalent of "good old boys," and they spent most of their time complaining about their wives. (Their wives, of course, were waiting for them at home, looking after the kids.) They treated Alfie as a "character," a wealthy celebrity from the big city who nevertheless knew how to talk dirty and drink like a man.

As a veteran interviewer, Alfie was adept at gaining the trust of people whose lives were different from his own. His participation at the bar, however, went beyond mimicry. He seemed to have embraced the values of his country neighbours, at first because they amused him, then more and more as a perverse rejection of his former life in Manhattan.

When we left around midnight, most of the regulars were barely able to stand. Some of them were playing unlisted selections on the jukebox — obscene songs about nymphomaniacs who were only good for one thing, or frigid women who got what was coming to them. Over by the ten-pin-bowling machine, an argument had been going on for half an hour concern-

ing whose turn it was to play, and it was starting to get nasty. I was glad to leave.

Back at Alfie's house, he turned in, taking a bottle with him. I sat by the embers of the fire in the living room, reading a play he had recently written, based on his short story "Fondly Fahrenheit." It was a solid piece of work, but the number of scenes and actors made it far too expensive to stage, and I couldn't understand why he had spent six months reworking this piece of his past. It seemed like a dead end; but then, so did life in Bucks County.

Around 2 a.m. he reappeared and seemed to want to talk. He said he realized the play was virtually impossible to produce, but he'd felt like writing it anyway. "They don't appreciate us, you know," he said suddenly, on a tangent. "They just don't understand."

He said he knew, beyond any doubt, that *Golem 100* was his best book, but readers were too short-sighted to grasp this. He felt rejected, and unwilling to write anything more for them. It was the first time I had ever heard him complain about the reception of his work, and I felt embarrassed, as if I were listening to one of the men back at the bar complaining that his wife didn't understand him.

The next day, I asked about Alfie's book *Tender Loving Rape*, which I had seen in manuscript when I worked for Avon in 1972. It was a suspense story, tightly written, set in the New York worlds of advertising and television, which he knew well. It also included a very fine depiction of a scientist torn between love and work. The book had never been published.

Alfie said I should forget about it, because it was a lost cause. That was what he always said, when I asked about it every year or so. This time, I demanded to see the manuscript, and he finally consented to dig for it in his study. He found it in a dusty box, and I promised to submit it on his behalf to some small presses. Surely, we could get a limited edition into print, even if there was no way to interest

major publishers (who had mostly complained that it was a non-genre novel containing slang and social milieux that were out of date).

I didn't visit Alfie again. I sold my car, which made it hard to reach his house, and in any case he seemed to want to break his ties with New York. He wrote occasional funny notes in reply to items that I sent him, and on the phone he always tried to project his same old indomitable spirit. But he obviously wasn't indomitable any more. He fell repeatedly, and I was told that his bartender was now looking after him. I imagined him out there among the bigots of Bucks County, and it seemed a travesty; yet he had consciously chosen that world, and presumably, he knew what he wanted.

*Tender Loving Rape* (which we retitled *Tender Loving Rage*) was turned down by several small presses, who said they would have a hard time selling even 300 copies of it in hardcover. His was a name from the past, unknown to new readers, and of no interest to collectors. (Of course, now that he's dead, this situation may change.) I said nothing to him about the rejections, and he never asked about the book.

In 1986 I was able to make a deal to publish *The Stars My Destination* in hardcover from Franklin Watts. He was very appreciative of this, although he wrote an extremely funny letter complaining about the dust jacket.

Later in the year, aided by an unexpected donation from an anonymous benefactor, I decided to start my own little publishing business. *Tender Loving Rage* was one of the first titles I wanted to publish. When I told Alfie this, he said I was a fool to bother, but if I wanted to, I could go ahead, except that he didn't want any of the money. So, I drew up a contract (which specified no advance, but a good rate of royalties) and sent it to Alfie's agent, Kirby McCauley.

Time passed. I called Kirby often, but he never remembered to pass the contract on to Alfie, even though he said it was a fair agreement and, indeed, he consented to a similar deal

with another of his clients. On the basis of my own verbal agreement with Alfie, I got the book typeset. Then a family crisis and a difficult tax audit complicated my life, and I stopped calling to remind Kirby that the contract needed to be signed. This was my sin of omission.

**A**lfie is now dead, and he won't ever see the book in print. I have no idea how much it mattered to him, partly because he armoured himself more successfully against professional disappointment than any other writer I have known. He, after all, was the man who persisted as the lone stylistic innovator of his time, without any support group to back him up. The only time I heard him even mention audience response was on that last evening in Pennsylvania, when he briefly allowed his bitterness to show.

When I first met him, in 1970, I asked him how he dealt with rejection. "Drink more," he told me, with a laugh.

At that time, I was a self-conscious acolyte. One of the rare and wonderful things about the science-fiction field is that one can meet a literary hero and, to one's astonishment, be treated as an equal. This is a very special form of generosity from one generation to another. I'm not sure that I repaid that generosity as much as I should have.

I am left with some questions to which I have no answers. Should his literary friends have done more for him? Should I? Did I see him as he really was, or am I embroidering my experience? Is there any way to avert the terribly painful deterioration in the lives and work of our greatest innovators, who are most valuable as writers, yet not always most widely acclaimed? And: When the life of a brilliant man ends in reclusive alcoholism, who is to blame?

has been instituted in the United States. The first winner is Judith Moffett, for her story "Surviving" (*Fantasy and Science Fiction*, June 1986). The award is administered by James Gunn — sf writer, professor of English, and head of the "Center for the Study of SF" at the University of Kansas. Theodore Sturgeon's memory has also been honoured in Britain by the publication in 1987 of *A Touch of Sturgeon* (Simon & Schuster, £10.95), a collection of his finest sf stories, selected and introduced by David Pringle.

**Ian Watson's** fantasy/horror story "Jingling Geordie's Hole" (IZ 17) has now been turned into a full-length novel which should be published by Gollancz next summer as *The Fire Worm*. The author says: "it'll appear as sf since it contains alchemy, which is fictional science..." Another IZ author, **Christopher Burns**, has sold his first collection of short stories, *About the Body*, to Secker & Warburg. It contains the three pieces he has published in this magazine to date, plus other stories from the London Magazine and elsewhere.

**William Gibson**, whose output of new fiction seems to have decreased since he was lured to Hollywood, has recently completed the screenplay for the sf movie *Aliens Three*. Shooting has yet to commence, and Walter Hill may direct. Steven Spielberg's film of J.G. Ballard's *Empire of the Sun* opened in America on 8th December 1987 (we shall have to wait until March 1988 in the UK). Variety says of the movie: "Except for its basic intelligence, there is no recognizing the stamp of brilliant playwright Tom Stoppard in the screenplay. Much more visible is the virtual inventory of Spielberg touches... All technical contributions are, almost by definition, monumentally good... Overall, this is a terrifically ambitious work..."

British publishers' Spring 1988 lists include the following sf and fantasy titles of interest (among many others): *The Influence* by Ramsey Campbell (Century); *Unquenchable Fire* by Rachel Pollack (Century); *Four Hundred Billion Stars* by Paul J. McAuley (Gollancz); *Land of Dreams* by James P. Blaylock (Grafton); *Life During Wartime* by Lucius Shepard (Grafton); *The Tommyknockers* by Stephen King (Hodder); *The Dark Lady* by Mike Resnick (Legend); *Araminta Station* by Jack Vance (NEL); and *The Movement of Mountains* by Michael Blumlein (Simon & Schuster). *Interzone: The 2nd Anthology* (a 1987 hardcover from S & S) will appear as a New English Library paperback in August 1988 — "with some PR muscle behind it," according to Kathy Gale, NEL's energetic sf editor.

Snippets of American publishing news: the late Terry Carr's science-fic-

tion anthology series, *Universe*, will continue as a bi-annual volume from Doubleday and Bantam Books, with Robert Silverberg and Karen Haber as editors. **Fritz Leiber**, now aged 77, is working on a new Fafhrd and Gray Mouser sword-and-sorcery novel, part of which has already been published in *Whispers* magazine. Spring 1988 sf and fantasy books in the US which look as though they may be interesting include: *Metrophage* by Richard Kadrey (Ace); *An Alien Light* by Nancy Kress (Arbor House); *Islands in the Net* by Bruce Sterling (Arbor House); *Wetware* by Rudy Rucker (Avon); *Neon Lotus* by Marc Laidlaw (Bantam); *The White Serpent* by Tanith Lee (DAW); *Neverness* by David Zindell (Fine); *In Darkness Waiting* by John Shirley (NAL); *The Gold Coast* by Kim Stanley Robinson (Tor); and *Adulthood Rites* by Octavia Butler (Warner).

The latest issue of **Foundation: The Review of Science Fiction** (number 41, published January 1988) is devoted to Arthur C. Clarke — to mark his recent seventieth birthday. It contains articles by Arthur Clarke and his brother Fred Clarke (the latter is about Arthur's childhood), Edward James (on Clarke and Dan Dare), K.V. Bailey (poems inspired by Clarke's fiction), Stephen Goldman, George Hay and others. It also carries in-depth book reviews by Richard Cowper, Colin Greenland, Peter Nicholls, etc. *Foundation* is available from The SFF, North East London Polytechnic, Longbridge Rd., Dagenham RM8 2AS, UK.

**Science Fiction Studies** number 43, November 1987, concentrates on sf films, with stimulating heavy-weight essays on Tarkovsky, the "Mad Max" movies, *Blade Runner*, *Return of the Jedi*, *Back to the Future* and much more. Andrew Gordon writes an interesting review of what seems to be his critical book of the year: *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film* by Vivian Sobchack (Ungar, 1987, \$14.95) — a "brilliant book... essential reading not only for scholars of SF or SF film but also for anyone interested in theories about and studies of contemporary mass culture." The threecyearly *S-F Studies* is available from Professor R.M. Philmus, English Dept., Concordia University, 7141 Sherbrooke St. W., Montreal, Quebec H4B 1RG, Canada.

David Pringle

(If you have any sf-related news to pass on to our readers please send it to the above at Interzone's main address.)

## NEWS

The winners of the 1987 **World Fantasy Awards** (announced on 1st November at the World Fantasy Convention, Nashville, Tennessee) are:  
Best novel: *Perfume* by Patrick Suskind  
Best novella: "Hatrack River" by Orson Scott Card

Best short story: "Red Light" by David J. Schow

Best collection: *Tales of the Quintana Roo* by James Tiptree, Jr

Special award — professional: Jane Yolen

Life achievement award: Jack Finney

A **Theodore Sturgeon Award** for the best sf or fantasy short story of the year

# Greg Egan Scatter My Ashes

**E**very night, at exactly a quarter past three, something dreadful happens on the street outside our bedroom window. We peek through the curtains, yawning and shivering in the life-draining chill, and then we clamber back beneath the blankets without exchanging a word, to hug each other tightly and hope for sound sleep before it's time to rise.

Usually what we witness verges on the mundane. Drunken young men fighting, swaying about with outstretched knives, cursing incoherently. Robbery, bashings, rape. We wince to see such violence, but we can hardly be shocked or surprised any more, and we're never tempted to intervene: it's always far too cold, for a start! A single warm exhalation can coat the window pane with mist, transforming the most stomach-wrenching assault into a safely cryptic ballet for abstract blobs of light.

On some nights, though, when the shadows in the room are subtly wrong, when the familiar street looks like an abandoned film set, or a painting of itself perversely come to life, we are confronted by truly disturbing sights, oppressive apparitions which almost make us doubt we're awake, or, if awake, sane. I can't catalogue these visions, for most, mercifully, are blurred by morning, leaving only a vague uneasiness and a reluctance to be alone even in the brightest sunshine.

One image, though, has never faded.

In the middle of the road was a giant human skull. How big was it? Big enough for a child, perhaps six or seven years old, to stand trapped between the jaws, bracing them apart with outstretched arms and legs, trembling with the effort but somehow, miraculously, keeping the massive teeth from closing in.

As we watched I felt, strange as it may sound, inspired, uplifted, filled with hope by the sight of that tiny figure holding out against the blind, brutal creature of evil. Wouldn't we all like to think of innocence as a tangible force to be reckoned with? Despite all evidence to the contrary.

Then the four huge, blunt teeth against which the child was straining began to reform, tapering to needle-fine points. A drop of blood fell from the back of each upraised hand. I cried out something, angry and horrified. But I didn't move.

A gash appeared in the back of the child's neck. Not a wound: a mouth, the child's new and special mouth, violently writhing, stretched open ever wider by four sharp, slender fangs growing in perfect mimicry of the larger fangs impaling the child's palms and feet.

The new mouth began to scream, at first a clumsy, choking sound, made without a tongue; but then a torn, bloody scrap of flesh appeared in place, the tongue of the old mouth uprooted and inverted, and the cries gave full voice to an intensity of suffering and fear that threatened to melt the glass of the window, sear away the walls of the room, and drag us into a pit of darkness where one final scream would echo forever.

When it was over, we climbed into bed and snuggled up together.

I dreamt that I found a jigsaw puzzle, hidden in a dark, lost corner of the house. The pieces were in a plain cardboard box, unaccompanied by any illustration of what the assembled puzzle portrayed. Wendy laughed and told me not to waste my time, but I sat frowning over it for an hour every evening, until after many weeks only a handful of pieces remained unplaced.

Somehow, even then, I didn't know what the picture was, but as I lazily filled in the very last gap, I felt a sudden overpowering conviction that whatever the jigsaw showed, I did not want to see it.

I woke a little before dawn. I kissed Wendy very softly, I gently stroked her shoulders and breasts with my fingertips. She rearranged herself, pulled a face, but didn't wake. I was about to brush her forehead with one hand, which I knew would make her open her eyes and give me a sleepy smile, when it occurred

to me that if she did, there might be small, fanged mouths behind her eyelids.

**W**hen I woke again it was half past seven, and she was already up. I hate that, I hate waking in an empty bed. She was reading the paper as I sat down to breakfast.

"So, what's happening in the world?"

"A fifth child's gone missing."

"Shit. Don't they have any suspects yet? Any evidence, any clues?"

"A fisherman reported something floating on the lake. The police went out in a boat to have a look."

"And?"

"It turned out to be a calf foetus."

I gulped coffee. I hate the taste of coffee, and it sets my stomach squirming, but I simply have to drink it.

"It says police will be diving all day today, searching the lake."

"I might go out there, then. The lake looks fantastic in this weather."

"When I'm snug in my office with the heater on full blast, I'll think of you."

"Think of the divers. They'll have the worst of it."

"At least they know they'll get paid. You could spend the whole day there for nothing."

"I'd rather take my kind of risk than theirs."

Once she was gone, I cut out the article on the vanished child. The walls of my study are papered with newsprint, ragged grey odd-shaped pieces affixed only at their top corners, free to rustle when the door is opened or closed. Sometimes, when I'm sitting at my desk for a moment after I've switched off the lamp, I get a strong impression of diseased skin.

"Put them in a scrap book!" says Wendy, whenever she ventures in to grimace at the state of the room. "Or better still, put them in a filing cabinet and see if you can lose the key!" But I need to keep them this way, I need to see them all at once, spread out before me like a satellite photograph, an aerial view of this age of violence. I'm looking for a pattern. My gaze darts from headline to headline, from STRANGLER to STALKER to RIPPER to SLASHER, hunting for a clue to the terrible unity, hunting for the nature of the single dark force which I know lies behind all the different nightmare stories, all the different fearful names.

I have books too, of course, I have shelves stuffed with volumes, some learned, some hysterical, from treatises on Vlad the Impaler to discussions of the entrails of London prostitutes to heavy psychoanalysis of the Manson gang. I have skimmed these works, read a page here and a page there only, for to clutter my mind with details can only distract me from the whole.

I recall precisely when my obsession began. I was ten. A convict, a murderer, had escaped from a nearby prison, and warnings were broadcast urging us to barricade our homes. My parents, naturally, tried not to alarm me, but we all slept together that night, in the room with the smallest window, and when the poor cat mewed to be let in the back door, my mother would let nobody, not even my father, budge.

I dozed and woke, dozed and woke, and each time dreamt that I was not sleeping but lying awake, waiting for the utter certainty of the unstoppable, blood-



thirsty creature bursting through the door and slicing us all in two.

They caught him the next morning. They caught him too late. A service station attendant was dead, cut up beyond belief by an implement that was never found.

They showed the killer on TV that night, and he looked nothing like the stuff of nightmares: thin, awkward, squinting, dwarfed between two massive, smug policemen. Yet for all his apparent weakness and shyness, he seemed to know something, he seemed to be holding a secret, not so much about murder itself as about the cameras, the viewers, about exactly what he meant to us. He averted his eyes from the lenses, but the hint of a smile on his lips declared that everything was, and always would be, just the way he wanted it, just the way he'd planned it from the start.

I drove to the lake and set up my camera with its longest lens, but after peering through the view-finder for ten minutes, keeping the police boat perfectly framed, following its every tiny drift, I switched to binoculars to save my eyes and neck. Nothing was happening. Faint shouts reached me now and then, but the tones were always of boredom, discomfort, irritation. Soon I put down the binoculars. If they found something, I'd hear the change at once.

I drank coffee from a flask, I paced. I took a few shots of divers backflipping into the water, but none seemed special, none captured the mood. I watched the water birds and felt somehow guilty for not knowing their names.

The sky and the water were pale grey, the colour of soggy newsprint. Thick smoke rose from a factory on the far shore, but seemed to fall back down again on almost the same spot. The chill, the bleakness, and the morbid nature of my vigil worked together to fill me with an oppressive sense of gloom, but cutting through that dullness and despair was the acid taste of anticipation.

My back was turned when I heard the shouts of panic. It took me seconds to spot the boat again, forever to point the camera. An inert diver was being hauled on board, to the sound of much angry swearing. Someone ripped off his face mask and began resuscitation. Each time I fired the shutter, I thought: what if he dies? If he dies it will be my fault, because if he dies I'll have a sale for sure.

I packed up my gear and fled before the boat reached the shore, but not before the ambulance arrived. I glanced at the driver, who looked about my age, and thought: why am I doing my job, and not his? Why am I voyeur, a parasite, a vulture, a leech, when I could be saving people's lives and sleeping the sleep of the just every night?

Later, I discovered that the cop was in a coma. Evidently there'd been a malfunction of his air supply. I sold one of the pictures, which appeared with the caption KISS OF LIFE! The editor said, "That could easily win you a prize." I smiled immodestly and mumbled about luck.

Wendy is a literary agent. We went out to dinner that night with one of her clients, to celebrate the signing of a contract. The writer was a quiet, thoughtful, attractive woman. Her husband worked in a bank,

but played football for some team or other on week-ends, and was built like a vault.

"So, what do you do for a crust?" he asked.

"I'm a freelance photographer."

"What's that mean? Fashion models for the front of Vogue or centrefolds for *Playboy*?"

"Neither. Most of my work is for newspapers, or news magazines. I had a picture in *Time* last year."

"What of?"

"Flood victims trapped on the roof of their farm."

"Yeah? Did you pay them some of what you got for it?"

Wendy broke in and described my day's achievement, and the topic switched naturally to that of the missing children.

"If they ever catch the bloke who's doing it," said the footballer, "he shouldn't be killed. He should be tortured for a couple of days, and then crippled. Say they cut off both his legs. Then there's no chance he'll escape from prison on his own steam, and when they let him free in a year or two, like they always end up doing, who's he going to hurt?"

I said, "Why does everyone assume there's a killer? Nobody's yet found a single drop of blood, or a finger-print, or a footprint. Nobody knows for sure that the children are dead, nobody's proved that at all."

The writer said, "Maybe the Innocents are ascending into Heaven."

For a moment I thought she was serious, but then she smirked at the cleverness of her sarcasm. I kept my mouth shut for the rest of the evening.

In the taxi home, though, I couldn't help muttering a vague, clumsy insult about Neanderthal fascists who revelled in torture. Wendy laughed and put an arm around my waist.

"Jealousy really becomes you," she said. I couldn't think of an intelligent reply.

That night, we witnessed a particularly brutal robbery. A taxi pulled up across the road, and the passengers dragged the driver out and kicked him in the head until he was motionless. They virtually stripped him naked searching for the key to his cashbox, then they smashed his radio, slashed his tyres, and stabbed him in the stomach before walking off, whistling Rossini.

Once Wendy had drifted back to sleep, I crept out of the bedroom and phoned for an ambulance. I nearly went outside to see what I could do, but thought: if I move him, if I even just try to stop the bleeding, I'll probably do more harm than good, maybe manage to kill him with my well-intentioned incompetence. End up in court. I'd be crazy to take the risk.

I fell asleep before the ambulance arrived. By morning there wasn't a trace of the incident. The taxi must have been towed away, the blood washed off the road by the water truck.

A sixth child had vanished. I returned to the lake, but found it was deserted. I dipped my hand in the water: it was oily, and surprisingly warm. Then I drove back home, cut out the relevant articles, and taped them into place on the wall.

As I did so, the jigsaw puzzle dream flooded into my mind, with the dizzying power of *déjà vu*. I stared at the huge grey mosaic, almost expecting it to change before my eyes, but then the mood passed and I shook

my head and laughed weakly.

The door opened. I didn't turn. Someone coughed. I still didn't turn.

"Excuse me."

It was a man in his mid-thirties, I'd say. Balding slightly, but with a young, open face. He was dressed like an office worker, in a white shirt with the cuffs rolled up, neatly pressed black trousers, a plain blue tie.

"What do you want?"

"I'm sorry. I knocked on the front door, and it was ajar. Then I called out twice."

"I didn't hear you."

"I'm sorry."

"What do you want?"

"Can I look? At your walls? Oh, there! The Marsden Mangler! I wonder how many people remember him today. Five years ago there were two thousand police working full time on that case, and probably a hundred reporters scurrying back and forth between the morgue and the nightclub belt. You know, half the jury fainted when they showed slides at the trial, including an abattoir worker."

"Nobody fainted. A few people closed their eyes, that's all. I was there."

"Watching the jury and not the slides, apparently."

"Watching both. Were you there?"

"Oh, yes! Every day without fail."

"Well, I don't remember you. And I got to know most of the regular faces in the public gallery."

"I was never in the public gallery." He crossed the room to peer closely at a Sunday paper's diagram detailing the *modus operandi* of the Knightsbridge Knifeman. "This is pretty coy, isn't it? I mean, anybody would think that the female genitalia—" I glared at him, and he turned his attention to something else, smiling a slight smile of tolerant amusement.

"How did you find out about my collection of clippings?" It wasn't something that I boasted about, and Wendy found it a bit embarrassing, perhaps a bit sick.

"Collection of clippings! You mustn't call it that! I'll tell you what this room is: it's a shrine. No lesser word will do. A shrine."

I glanced behind me. The door was closed. I watched him as he read a two-page spread on a series of unsolved axe murders, and although his gaze was clearly directed at the print, I felt as if he was staring straight back at me.

Then I knew that I had seen him before. Twenty years before, on television, smiling shyly as they hustled him along, never quite looking at the camera, but never quite turning away. My eyes began to water, and a crazy thought filled my head: hadn't I known then, hadn't I been certain, that the killer would come and get me, that nothing would stand in his way? That the man had not aged was unremarkable, no, it was necessary, because if he had aged I would never have recognized him, and recognition was exactly what he wanted. Recognition was the start of my fear.

I said, "You might tell me your name."

He looked up. "I'm sorry. I have been discourteous, haven't I? But—" (he shrugged) "—I have so many nicknames." He gestured widely with both hands, taking in all the walls, all the headlines. I pictured the door handle, wondering how quickly I could turn it with palms stinking wet, with numb, clumsy fingers.



"My friends, though, call me Jack."

He easily lifted me over his head, and then somehow (did he float up off the floor, or did he stretch up, impossibly doubling his height?) pinned me face-down against the ceiling. Four fangs grew to fill his mouth, and his mouth opened to fill my vision. It was like hanging over a living well, and as his distorted words echoed up from the depths, I thought: if I fall, nobody will ever find me.

"Tonight you will take my photograph. Catch me in the act with your brightest flashgun. That's what you want, isn't it?" He shook me. "Isn't it?" I closed my eyes, but that brought visions of a tumbling descent. I whispered, "Yes."

"You invoke me and invoke me and invoke me!" he ranted. "Aren't you ever sick of blood? Aren't you ever sick of the taste of blood? Today it's the blood of tiny children, tomorrow the blood of old women, next the blood of...who? Dark-haired prostitutes? Teenaged baby sitters? Blue-eyed homosexuals? And each time simply leaves you more jaded, longing for something crueler and more bizarre. Can't you sweeten your long, bland lives with anything but blood?

"Colour film. Bring plenty of colour film. Kodachrome, I want saturated hues. Understand?" I nodded. He told me where and when: a nearby street corner, at three fifteen.

I hit the floor with my hands out in front of me, jarring one wrist but not breaking it. I was alone. I ran through the house, I searched every room, then I locked the doors and sat on the bed, shaking, emitting small, unhappy noises every few minutes.

When I'd calmed down, I went out and bought ten rolls of Kodachrome.

We ate at home that night. I was supposed to cook something, but I ended up making do with frozen pizzas. Wendy talked about her tax problems, and I nodded.

"And what did you do with yourself today?"

"Research."

"For what?"

"I'll tell you tomorrow."

We made love. For a while it seemed like some sort of ritual, some kind of magic: Wendy was giving me strength, yes, she was fortifying me with mystical energy and spiritual power. Afterwards, I couldn't laugh at such a ludicrous idea, I could only despise myself for being able to take it seriously for a moment.

I dreamt that she gave me a shining silver sword.

"What's it for?" I asked her.

"When you feel like running away, stab yourself in the foot."

I climbed out of bed at two. It was utterly freezing, even once I was fully dressed. I sat in the kitchen with the light off, drinking coffee until I was so bloated that I could hardly breathe. Then I staggered to the toilet and threw it all up. My throat and lungs stung, I wanted to curl up and dissolve, or crawl back to the warm blankets, back to Wendy, to stay hidden under the covers until morning.

As I clicked the front door shut, it was like diving into a moonlit pool. Being safe indoors was at once a distant memory, lying warm in bed was a near-forgotten dream. No cars, no distant traffic noises, no clouds,

just a huge night sky and empty, endless streets.

It was five to three when I reached the place. I paced for a while, then walked around the block, but that only killed three minutes. I chose a direction and resolved to walk a straight line for seven minutes, then turn around and come back.

If I didn't turn around, if I kept walking, would he catch me? Would he return to the house and punish me? What if we moved, to another city, another state?

I passed a phone box, an almost blinding slab of solid light. I jingled my pockets, then remembered that I'd need no coin. I stood outside the booth for two minutes, I lingered in the half-open doorway for three, and then I lifted and replaced the handset a dozen times before I finally dialled.

When the operator answered, I slammed the phone down. I needed to defecate, I needed to lie down. I dialled again, and asked for the police. It was so easy. I even gave them my true name and address when they asked, without the least hesitation. I said "thank you" about six thousand times.

I looked at my watch: thirteen past three. I ran for the corner, camera swinging by the carrying strap, and made it back in ninety seconds.

Someone was climbing out through a dark window, holding a gagged, struggling child. It wasn't the man who'd called himself Jack, it wasn't the killer I'd seen on TV when I was ten.

I raised my camera.

Drop it and do something, drop it and save the child, you fool! Me against him? Against that? I'd be slaughtered! The police are coming, it's their job, isn't it? Just take the pictures. It's what you really want, it's what you're here to do.

Once I'd fired the shutter, once I'd taken the first shot, it was like flicking through the pages of a magazine. I was sickened, I was horrified, I was angry, but I wasn't there, so what could I do? The child was tortured. The child was raped. The child was mutilated. The child suffered but I heard no cries, and I saw only the flashgun's frozen tableaux, a sequence of badly-made waxworks.

The killer and I arranged each shot with care. He waited patiently while the flash recharged, and while I changed rolls. He was a consummate model: each pose he struck appeared completely natural, utterly spontaneous.

I didn't notice just when the child actually died. I only noticed when I ran out of film. It was then that I looked around at the houses on the street and saw half a dozen couples, peeking through their bedroom windows and stifling yawns.

He sprinted away when the police arrived. They didn't pursue him in the car; one officer loped off after him, the other knelt to examine the remains, then walked up to me. He tipped his head at my camera.

"Got it all, did you?"

I nodded. Accomplice, accomplice, accomplice. How could I ever explain, let alone try to excuse, my inaction?

"Fantastic. Well done."

Two more police cars appeared, and then the officer who'd gone in pursuit came marching up the street, pushing the hand-cuffed killer ahead of him.

**T**he best of the photographs were published widely, even shown on TV ("the following scenes may disturb some viewers"). A thousand law-abiding citizens rioted outside the courthouse, burning and slashing effigies, when he appeared to be placed on remand.

He was killed in his cell a week before the trial was due to start. He was tortured, raped and mutilated first. He must have been expecting to die, because he had written out a will:

*Burn my body and scatter my ashes from a high place.*

*Only then will I be happy. Only then will I find peace.*

They did it for him, too.

He has a special place on my wall now, and I never tire of reviewing it. The whole process can be seen at a glance. How the tabloids cheered him on, rewarding each presumed death with ever larger headlines, ever grislier speculations. How the serious papers strove so earnestly to understand him, with scholarly dissertations on the formative years of the great modern killers. How all the well-oiled mechanisms slipped into gear, how everybody knew their role. Quotes from politicians: "The community is outraged." But the outrage was bottled, recycled, flat and insincere.

What would-be killer could hesitate, could resist for even a second, such a cosy niche so lovingly prepared?

And I understand now why he wanted me there that night. He must have believed that if people could see, in colour, in close-up, the kind of atrocities that we treat as an industry, an entertainment, a thrilling diversion from the pettiness and banality of our empty lives, then we would at last recoil, we would at last feel some genuine shock, some genuine sadness, we

would at last be cured, and he would be free.

He was wrong.

So they've burnt his corpse and scattered his ashes. So what? Did he really believe that could possibly help him, did he really hope to end the interminable cycle of his incarnations?

I dream of fine black cinders borne by the wind, floating down to annoint ten thousand feverish brows. The sight of the tortured child, you see, has exerted an awful fascination upon people around the world.

The first wave of imitators copied the murder exactly as portrayed by my slides.

The second wave embellished and improvised.

The current fashion is for live broadcasts, and the change of medium has, of course, had some influence upon the technical details of the act.

I often sit in my study these days, just staring at the walls. Now and then I suffer moments of blind panic, when I am convinced for no reason that Jack has returned, and is standing right behind me with his mouth stretched open. But when I turn and look, I am always still alone. Alone with the headlines, alone with the photographs, alone with my obsession. And that, somehow, is far more frightening.

---

**Greg Egan** has worked recently as a computer programmer in a medical research institute in his native Australia. He has written a number of stories, including "Mind Vampires" (IZ 18) and another which appeared last year in the now-defunct magazine *Aphelion*. An "ultra-hard sf novel full of black hole physics and exotic spacecraft" is currently doing the rounds of publishers.

## COMING NEXT ISSUE

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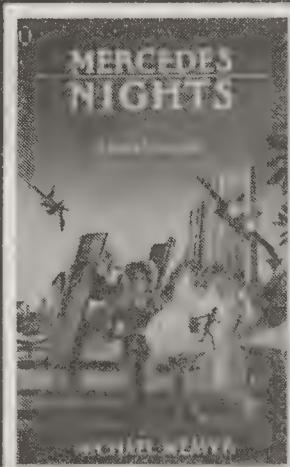
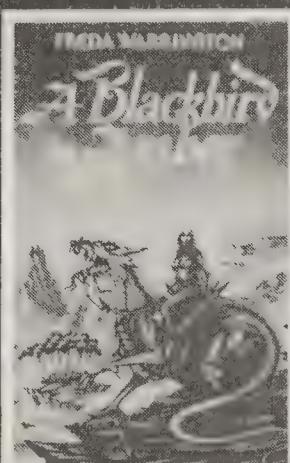
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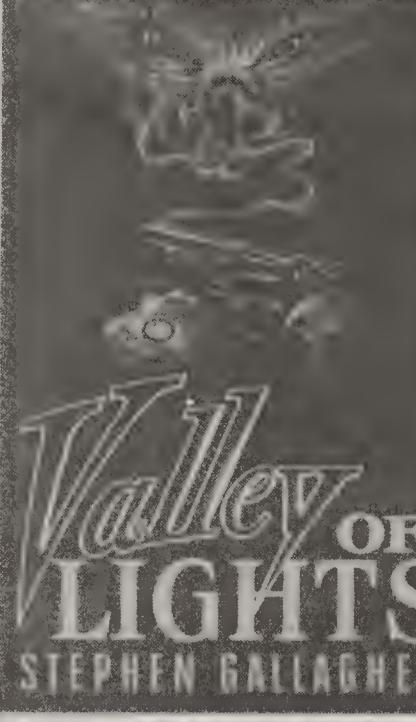
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PAPERBACK ORIGINAL

**T**here is no longer a cutting edge to the present. Like acid rain, unnumbered futures eat into the darkling blade, serrating and pocking the moments of our time here; and – not at all surprisingly – it becomes less and less easy to designate the genre of a large number of the books published without tags to guide us. It is, one supposes, a kind of mimesis. Again and again, mainstream novels echo the cavities and lesions in the face of the millennium to come and prove, on examination, to be unfixed in time and place – alternate histories in a sense far more telling than the theoretical sense by which any fiction must be read as an alternative history. The last two novels of MacDonald Harris come to mind, as does Garry Kilworth's *Spiral Winds* (The Bodley Head, £10.95). The mimetic presumptions that seem to underly Ian McEwan's *The Child in Time* (Cape, £10.95) are deeply compromised and corroded by chill fingers of a world to come. In *Tales of Natural and Unnatural Catastrophes* (Bloomsbury, £11.95), Patricia Highsmith hovers, perhaps a little precariously, between the ahistorical freedoms of the exemplary fable and the prison-cells of reportage.

Somewhere lost in the draft of *Spiral Winds* there is a good book which has not yet quite been written, or for that matter edited (turn from page 185 to 186 for an example of proofing more negligent than one would normally tolerate in an amateur production). By intention, it seems to be a tale of predetermined fixation, though the action of the book is far too loose to convey any sense of foredoomed impulsion. It is the story of two men obsessed by their role in the death of a British desert hero. In an Author's Note, Mr Kilworth acknowledges that in some sense his novel takes off from the death of T.E. Lawrence in a 1935 motorcycle accident, but makes clear that he has in no sense attempted to portray the actual subsequent lives of the teenagers who were involved in the fatal crash, and whose lives it must have affected. Clearly (though in a highly limited sense) the teenagers of *Spiral Winds* inhabit a different world from the one in which Lawrence died; Lawrence is himself never mentioned in the body of the book, which is set mainly in South West Arabia, far from Lawrence's field of action; and clearly Jim and Alan, as they enter middle age in the 1960s, are meant to bear a burden of signification no author could impose on any real persons. But it is somewhere here – perhaps because his sense of decorum prevents Mr Kilworth from any intensity of re-creation of any Lawrentian figure, either literally or in the imaginations of his protagonists – that *Spiral Winds* loses focus. Very simply, though the reader might expect the tragedy of 1935 to

# Book Reviews, 1 John Clute

shape the story of its survivors, what begins to happen in the 1960s has only an arbitrary connection with that event.

Mr Kilworth has been gifted with two protagonists, and studiously rises to the challenge of creating a spiralling plot to tell their story. Newsman Alan has been sent to witness the painful British withdrawal from Aden. Before disappearing inland with his guide, he meets Sarah, a young woman whose own obsession with the desert is the actual motor of the plot. She gets banker Jim's name from Alan, returns to England, meets and beds him and alienates him, readying him in some extremely obscure fashion to meet his destiny, which is to go himself to Arabia to find Alan, and to confront whatever it is in the desert whose urgencies all three characters think they are obeying. Sarah then utterly disappears from the book to which she has thus vicariously given the kiss of life. Jim goes to Arabia. He and Alan meet, after tribulations. Each seems dubious of the other's sense that there is something animate about the desert. At a central spot, they meet a Lawrentian figure who attacks them with a rifle; they kill him; but before he can be identified the sands have covered his remains. Jim returns to England. Stiff-necked Alan stays in Arabia.

The desert is vivid. Aden is portrayed brilliantly. Sarah is briefly vital, though too soon dismissed. But in a novel necessarily dependent upon a sustained mimetic presentation of the interior life of its protagonists, both Jim and Alan seem cardboardy, passive, blank-countenanced, and both drift through their stories in odd discontinuous fragmented jerks, pulled by strings to which it is difficult to give credence. Because Mr Kilworth has refused the generic solace of telling us a ghost story, he is bound to the mere verities of the world, in which the Lawrentian figment has – literally – nothing to say. And no matter how intelligently reticent Mr Kilworth has been about forbidding them any cheap resolutions, neither Jim nor Alan can make us believe a word they utter. So

we are left with stabs in the dark at telling the sand.

**T**here is something ponderous and skittish about the less satisfactory fables in Patricia Highsmith's new book, as though a large lepidopterologist were trying not to stamp. Oh dear. About the better stories, those that refrain from balderdash unction in the author's own sad pious voice, there is a wise cold sureness of anger so far from the pachydermatous that one wonders how one book could contain both the unspeakable "Rent-A-Womb Vs. the Mighty Right" and the brilliant "Operation Balsam; or Touch-Me-Not." The one moralizes and pummels and cheats and editorializes; the other, like a stiletto, stitches nightmares. But they are clearly from the same author. There is the same underlying tone of lonely pessimism about the fate of the planet, the same unrelenting fixity of gaze upon the suicidal progression of the human cancer through the body of the mother; there is the same final desolate calm, as though these disasters were being told from a long way away and a long time from now. The stories are what the title claims – *Tales of Natural and Unnatural Catastrophes*. In "The Mysterious Cemetery," as in "Operation Balsam," the disaster is pollution, whether medical or nuclear. In "President Buck Jones Rallies and Waves the Flag" it is an underpowered American President unable to distinguish lies from truth and capable of ending the world in a pet. In "Trouble at the Jade Towers," cockroaches eat the poisons intended to exterminate them so that, in a world increasingly poisoned, they are bound to thrive. And always in these stories, these fables told from another world of the collapse of our own, it is too late to mend.

**I**n Ian McEwan's *The Child in Time*, the focus on the irreparable narrows and sharpens into one overriding image of the near future in Britain. Spending little time on attempting a political characterization of a land further transformed by another five or

so years of the rule of Margaret Thatcher, who (though unnamed) is clearly the Prime Minister who appears in the text, he restricts himself to a single image of extraordinary desolation: the countryside of England has become a factory farm, great stretches of monoculture desert alternating with huge stands of identical conifers in rows. As no more than five years can have passed from 1987, this transformation drives a fable-like apocalyptic ground-bass through the chaste and recessive mimetic harmonies of his ostensible tale, which deals with individual traumas and their survival.

Stephen takes his small daughter to a supermarket and loses her – in a moment of inattention – to an unseen abductor. She is never recovered. Stephen is paralyzed at an early stage of mourning, a stage many men (the text implies) never transcend. He cannot keep himself from a litany of actions designed superficially to recover his daughter, but shaped secretly into a shield that will keep him from having to face the real living grief of her permanent loss. He stops writing the children's books which, in any case, only reflected an undue immurement in his own childhood, which they mined avidly. His wife Julie leaves him. Through his friendship with an editor turned politician he joins an appalling government committee whose task is to create a new Childcare Handbook in the spirit of the terrible new time. Years pass. Too much in the wind of the world, his friend literally reverts to childhood, at which point Stephen very slowly begins to come alive, though the world around him continues to die of the cancer of the state. He and Julie come together again. There has been some mystical flummery – beautifully written but somewhat discordant in a text otherwise wisely restrained – and a child is born in hope. But any sense of affirmation the text espouses must inch through the bars of that desolate bass, that recurring image of the desert into which any child will, this time, be born.

## Book Reviews, 2

### Paul J. McAuley

As three of the four books under review deal with confrontation between humans and aliens, that archetypal theme forever rendered faintly suspect by an excess of improbably rubber-suited actors in B-movies of the fifties and sixties, it's tempting to link them together. But this is one of the traps of reviewing. You come across a coincidence and call it a trend, or make it the nucleus of a theory that will almost certainly be invalidated by

the next batch of books dumped on your doorstep. So I'll avoid temptation and take the books one by one – and incidentally sidestep the problem of linking a sequel which describes an alien invasion from the inside, an end-of-the-world novel, a story of Primitive-Aliens-Who-Are-More-Than-They Seem, and an episodic novel about solving ecological crises with good old-fashioned technological knowhow.

I'll start with the sequel, Mary Gentle's *Ancient Light* (Gollancz, £11.95), which is a sequel (but not, perhaps, the expected one) to her minor bestseller *Golden Witchbreed*. Nominally science fiction, *Golden Witchbreed* was set on a post-holocaust, post-technological world, providing the excuse for skullduggery and intrigue amongst sword-wearing humanoid aliens and an extended tour through admittedly richly imagined landscapes. The easiest way to follow it (and considering its success, the safest way too) would have been to check off all the places missed the first time around. Fortunately, Gentle is a better writer than that – although, bookended by a list of characters, three appendices and as many maps, *Ancient Light* certainly starts out like a repeat performance.

Lynne de Lisle Christie has returned to the world of Orthe as an advisor to the PanOceanic Company, which wants to run down the rumour of a last stronghold of the technology of the Golden Witchbreed, the race whose downfall almost destroyed Orthe. But the Witchbreed heirs prove unexpectedly intransigent and the Company's search stirs up the rest of the population, descendants of the Witchbreed's slave race; and Christie's usefulness is devalued by a faulty memory, caused, she comes to realize, by something that happened to her during her previous visit to Orthe, in the Brown Tower. This mysterious structure secretly maintains some of the old technology, and Christie discovers that it is keeping in check the weapon, Ancient Light, which turned much of Orthe into crystalline desert. All this sets us up for the convoluted intrigue and detailed descriptions of alien customs and landscapes familiar from *Golden Witchbreed*, but it soon becomes apparent that Gentle's intentions are more serious. Beneath the expected storyline, she has woven a subtext of the influence of the past and memory of the past on the present. Her aliens inherit knowledge of previous lives, so that to them history and memory are the same thing. Their abhorrence of Witchbreed technology is rooted in actual memory of enslavement three thousand years before, memories which Christie shares because of her experience in the Brown Tower. And after "six F90 shuttles armed with mid-tech long-range weapons" destroy harbours in an attempt to stop an invasion,

a specific parallel to the recent US bombing of Libya, the plot takes a darker turn. Thereafter, all the characters are swept on helplessly by the inexorable tide of history as Gentle pitilessly deconstructs her fantasy, her writing gaining in strength and vividness even as she abandons plotlines in midair. By the end of the book the Brown Tower has been destroyed and the world is doomed. All the characters can do is bicker amongst the ruins. Your reviewer is left with the opinion that Gentle has bravely written herself out of the corner she's found herself in after the success of *Golden Witchbreed*, and hopes that she will now move on to better things.

**O**n the simplest level, *Ancient Light* is a story of alien invasion. So too is Greg Bear's *The Forge of God* (Gollancz, £11.95), in which first contact with aliens ends in the destruction of the Earth. Now, Bear has an enviable record of radically reworking old sf chestnuts such as this with a genuine sense of wonder stemming from extrapolation of the latest scientific discoveries. But although *The Forge of God* begins powerfully enough, things don't really come together. A dying alien appears in Death Valley, saying that it brings very bad news. At the same time robots emerge from a scaled-down fake of Ayer's Rock in Australia and proclaim peace and the advent of a new era of plenty, and one of Jupiter's moons disappears. It is soon clear that the Solar System has become a battleground between two sets of self-replicating Von Neumann machines, those intent on destroying Earth and all its life, and those opposing the destroyers' rampage across the Galaxy. The dying alien and the robots were merely diversions so that the destroyers could inject slugs of neutronium and antineutronium into decaying orbits inside the Earth's crust; when the slugs meet at the core, the resulting explosion will fragment the Earth (although how humanity could have prevented this in the first place is never explained). All good old-fashioned gosh-wow stuff to be sure, but Bear has chosen to tell his story exclusively from the point of view of his human protagonists, and often through their interminable conversations. It's rather like glimpsing a vast, panoramic canvas through a pinhole, and the story fails to grip despite the artificial tension of those slugs ticking away around the Earth's core.

Not even the beneficial aliens can prevent the end of the Earth; all they can do is enlist the help of a motley crew of humans to save as much of Earth's culture and genetic diversity as possible, and this doesn't make very interesting reading because there is no one to oppose them. The leader of the cult of the Forge of God, who believe

that the coming destruction is the result of divine displeasure, is conveniently assassinated, and the President he had influenced is impeached. Meanwhile, various characters bemoan their fate (I've never before read an sf novel in which people weep so readily; Bear may have been aiming for pathos but too often he hits a slushy vein of sentiment instead) or indulge in terminally teleological speculations about the Earth being an entire self-aware organism in competition with all the other planetary organisms in the Galaxy, this being the *raison d'être* of the destroyers. "Is it any real coincidence, you think," someone muses, "that in the twentieth century, we've been hit by so many retrovirus and immune system epidemics? We can't solve these epidemics without understanding life to the nth degree. Gaia is regulating us, regulating herself...." Just how Gaia knows that we've advanced enough to understand AIDS isn't made clear. Perhaps she subscribes (ahem) to Nature. All this is a shame, because as is shown in a truly apocalyptic episode describing the fragmentation of the Earth as seen by a geologist in Yosemite Park, Bear can be a writer of no little vision. A pity it was so blinkered here.

**O**nwards. *The Wave and the Flame* (Gollancz, £10.95) is the first of two volumes with the collective title *Lear's Daughters*, written by Marjorie Bradley Kellogg "with" (as it says on the cover) NASA climatologist William Rossow. An expedition from Earth, sponsored by a multicorporate which hopes to exploit the lithium reserves of the planet Fiix, finds not the reported desert but a savage winter; and then a catastrophic thaw disables the expedition's shuttle and forces them to take shelter in the caves of the apparently primitive Sawls. Soon it becomes clear that the Sawls are more than they seem, and that their mythological tales can predict the violent climatic swings when science cannot, and the expedition becomes split between those who want to understand the Sawls' culture and history and save them from exploitation, and those who want to mine the lithium. This is well-told, thoroughly conventional sf, but there is a bland, wishful quality which devalues its revelations. The Sawls are too conveniently human in appearance and behaviour, their lovingly-detailed society too idealized. The weather may be awful on Fiix, but the caves are beguilingly cosy. There is no murder, no rape, no theft. No drug addicts prowl the litter-free corridors; the walls are unbesmirched with graffiti; everyone unquestioningly works for the common good, just as they always have. In short, *The Wave and the Flame* is pure, painless wish-fulfillment, eighties safe sf.

**F**inally, a little light relief. George R.R. Martin's *Tuf Voyaging* (Gollancz, £10.95), cobbled together from stories which mostly had their first appearance in *Analog*, is straightforward skiffy entertainment. Haviland Tuf (white, hairless and paunched, relentlessly pedantic, he resembles a caricature of the archetypal *Analog* reader), comes into possession of a huge seedship of the vanished Ecological Engineering Corps, and uses the ship's capability of mass-producing alien or genetically engineered life-forms to solve a variety of ecological disasters. Martin employs a certain dry wit, and the stories, which in true *Analog* house style proceed almost entirely through argument loaded in favour of the hero, showcase his talent for inventing nastily baroque yet mostly plausible creatures, but he's coasting here. And why not? The series has proven so popular that a sequel volume is already in the works. I'll leave you, gentle reader, to draw the moral.

## Turkey Shoot

### Peter T. Garratt

**T**his column is the revenge of those IZ reviewers who only get to look at books no one else wants. The implication is that they are turkeys, and it's true that many of these birds will never fly far. However, we do find some surprisingly good stuff at the bottom of the pile, and this will be given its due. Let's start with a typical hybrid: *The Throne of Scone* by Patricia Kennealy (Grafton, £3.50). Having dreamed up an absurd idea (the Cosmic Kelts, whom we first met in *The Copper Crown*) Kennealy develops it with dogged determination, and very mixed results. The heroine, Aeron Aoibhell (pronounced 'Aaron Evil') a sort of Battlestar Boadicea, leads her band, armed with swords, laser-culverins, and magical devices, on a quest for a Galactic Arthur, his Grail, sword, etc. There are dud passages, littered with dull conspiracies and unmemorable minor characters, but the last three-quarters is surprisingly enjoyable, uses its source material well, and can be moving in parts – as when describing a doomed, fatalistic, alien race.

If anyone assumes this column will never review books which remind one of Benford, with a dash of John Fowles, they should try the excellent *Knight Moves* by Walter Jon Williams (Futura, £2.95). Physics and classical mythology rub shoulders with madness and alien life-forms. The protagonists are lovers: one has accepted a treatment conferring virtual immortality; the other has refused it, fearing an eternity of senility. One flaw is that Williams

seems unaware of the differences between types of insanity resulting from old age, and from other causes.

*Spinneret* by Timothy Zahn (Arrow, £2.95) is a 50s style hard-ish sf adventure: readable, but the human characters have no depth, and the innumerable aliens resemble nothing so much as the cast of a game of "Cosmic Encounter." Some sense of wonder is achieved, but I was irritated by a blinkered view of relationships between UN and USA, projected into the future. The less said about *Assault on the Gods* by Stephen Goldin (Arrow, £2.50) the better. A classic idiot-plot, in which a megalomaniac entrepreneur tries to conquer an entire planet, equipped only with an unarmed merchant ship.

*Firedancer* by Ann Maxwell (Futura, £2.50) is from the school of space opera which holds that it raises the tone, if the hero(in)es do a dance, or put on a show, between zapping their enemies. On the whole, it does. (At least for we who worship the memory of Leigh Brackett.) *Mute* by Piers Anthony (NEL, £3.50) is an enjoyable romp through the galaxy. Various extra-sensory powers are used fairly intelligently, as the hero, his cute girlfriend, and their menagerie of psi-powerful animals, get involved in a battle for power between a mega-computer, and an army of lobotomized psychopaths. It bats along well, despite being obtrusively padded with repetitive banter, and ludicrously-timed philosophizing (mostly during the fight scenes!).

*Taming the Forest King* by Claudia J. Edwards (Headline, £2.50) is a passable fantasy, avoiding most of the characteristic oversimplifications; set in an odd society, with an eighteenth century range of offences for which people can be hung, and considerable sexual equality. The competent heroine's task of clearing up a maladministered province, aswarm with mildly dangerous supernatural oddities, is sidetracked by her complex love-life. (She is so blind to one admirer's interest, I could almost say, her life of love complexes.) The blurb describes *Downtime* by Peter Fox (Coronet, £2.95) as "a hi-tech detective story of the near future," and likens the hero to Philip Marlowe. Answers to all puzzles are given away gratuitously well before the end, setting it in concrete as "thriller" rather than mystery. Though Fox's investigator may resemble Chandler's, his style certainly doesn't. The only point of contact is late 1990s British business and TV executives talking like LA gangsters: not so much hard-boiled as hard to believe. The climax, an attempt to sabotage the celebrations of the New Year, Century, and Millennium, is quite effective, but it was hard going getting there.

Turkey of the column: Downtime.  
Best Buy: Knight Moves.

## Fantasy, Etc

We have waited a long time for Peter S. Beagle to write another novel. It is 18 years since his humorous, fey and lyrical *The Last Unicorn*. Now at last comes *The Folk of the Air* (Headline, £4.95), a portion of which was published in 1977 – and it has been well worth the wait for the full thing. It doesn't repeat the formula of his previous books, but intertwines nostalgia for the campus life of the sixties with a fantasy on the dangers of playing games with time and magic. It is a beautifully written and leisurely book – not as though it doesn't know where it is going, but more as though it's a journey to be enjoyed for its own sake. I was captivated by Beagle's San Francisco, fascinated by the trouble his medievalists go to for authenticity, and satisfied by the denouement in which the unleashed forces are brought under control.

The intrusion of fantasy into the real world is also explored in *New York by Knight* by Esther Friesner (Headline, £2.95). Here an escaping dragon and pursuing knight battle on the streets of New York. The city and its characters are solidly depicted and the bulk of the

book is as exciting as any thriller. But it is unfortunate that the other world, from which the combatants have come, should consist of a rather insubstantial melange of fantasy elements. An alternative version of New York is to be found in Mike Resnick's *Stalking the Unicorn* (Arrow, £2.95). This is the city which can sometimes be seen out of the corner of the eye: inhabited by elves, leprechauns, gnomes and, of course, a unicorn – but no magic! What looks like magic is "totally consistent with the laws of the universe," allowing a person "to channel his electromagnetic brain waves more efficiently" or "altering their subjectivity vis-a-vis Time." In a delightful pastiche of Raymond Chandler, a New York private detective is hired to visit this "other" New York and find a missing unicorn. All manner of bizarre elements are thrown together in one of the funniest fantasy novels I have ever read.

In a completely alien world a rather different type of detective has to solve a series of horrific murders: this happens in *The Witches of Wenshar* by Barbara Hambly (Unwin, £2.95). Much of the story revolves around the question of whether "witch power" is innocent or evil. One of the most satisfying aspects of the book is the sense of nightmare claustrophobia it evokes when something really evil is described. The problem for the central

character of *Mirage* by Louise Cooper (Unwin, £2.95) is to discover who he really is. He is obviously not just a mindless creation summoned to save a city from its supernatural enemy. Much of the story is predictable, but the undersea enemy is well conceived and the character of the prince of the city refreshingly complex.

Complex but disappointing is how I would describe Tanith Lee's *Delusion's Master* and *Delirium's Mistress* (Arrow, £2.50 and £3.50), volumes in her "Flat Earth" series. Although I admire Lee's style and the ambitiousness of her cosmology, I find the mixture of flat characters and soft porn rather distasteful. Susan Schwartz's *The Woman of Flowers* (Pan, £2.95) is disappointing only in comparison with the first of her "Heirs to Byzantium" series. As less is known about Celtic and early Viking cultures, the beliefs and practices here do not ring as true as those from the Graeco-Egyptian background of the earlier volume. However, the journey across Russia from Byzantium to an un-Romanized Britain is enthralling, and the elements derived from shamanistic practices are fascinating. Unfortunately the book breaks in two with the change of main character from Alexa to her brother Marric, and this does spoil the coherence of the story.

The principal character in *Wolf in the Shadow* by David Gemmell (Century £5.95) is seeking "Jerusalem" in a world which has been totally changed by tidal waves and earthquakes. He searches through a culture which is a cross between the Old Testament and the Old West, where the settlers battle against lost science and strange powers (both paranormal and supernatural). It is interesting to see religious obsession treated with both sympathy and non-commitment.

(Phyllis MacDonald)

**Archon** by Stuart Gordon (Macdonald, £11.95) starts off in familiar territory: a family is haunted by dreams and doom-ridden heirlooms, but the net is then drawn wider and wider, pulling in several sub-genres (magic rings, voodoo horror, voyages to lost islands, what did happen to Atlantis, bronze-age fertility rites) then ends up in the Comte de Paix during the Albigensian Crusade. This last part is perhaps a little bluntly mystical, and predictably pro-Cathar, but the setting is well-realized and had me re-reading Montaillou – which is surely a Good Thing.

**Kindred Spirits** edited by Jeffrey M. Elliot (Alyson, £4.50), **Worlds Apart** edited by Camilla Decamin, Eric Garber and Lyn Paleo (Alyson, £5.95) and **Chrome** by George Nader (Alyson, £5.95) are three titles from the Boston gay publishers, distributed in the UK by Gay Men's Press (PO Box 247, London N15 6RW). The Nader is a turgidly

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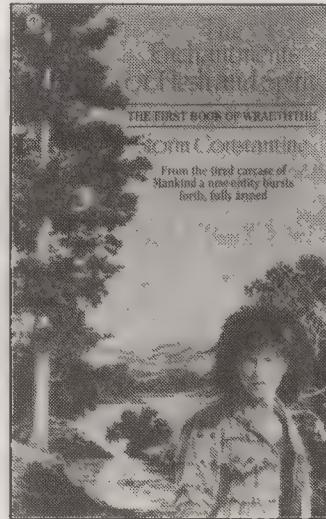
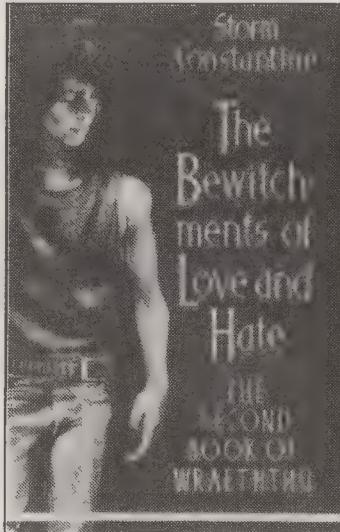
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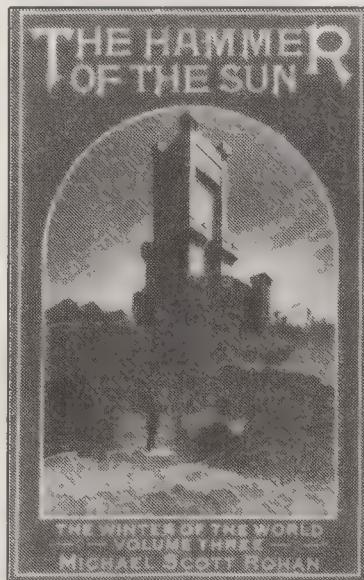


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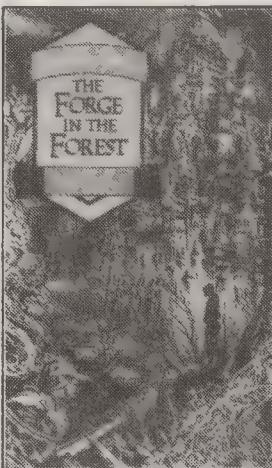
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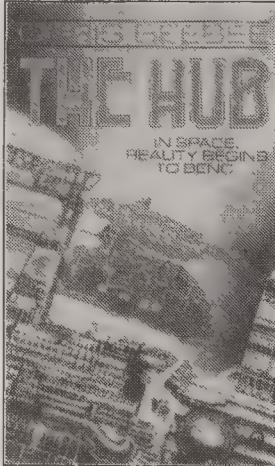
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written, rubbishy, sexist, macho wish-fulfilment novel. The two anthologies, despite the worst covers I have ever seen on paperbacks (perpetrated by George Barr in the style and standard of the twee-est convention art-show Trekkie stuff) are excellent selections of traditional and recent sf, including such well-known stories "Houston, Houston, Do You Read?" by James Tiptree, Jr (the late Alice Sheldon), "Time Considered as a Helix of Semi-Precious Stones" by Samuel R. Delany and "When It Changed" by Joanna Russ, as well as pieces by Rachel Pollack, Elizabeth Lynn, J.A. Salmonson, Robert Silverberg and others.

R.A. Lafferty is one writer who really does have a unique vision, and *Serpent's Egg* (Morrigan, £10.95) is extreme Lafferty. Those who love his work will lap it up, those who don't will find it hard to get past the first page. The central characters, mostly within three days of their 10th birthday, include a little-girl computer, a whole tribe of sinless apes from Ethiopia, Lord Randall, a were-wolverene (sic), bears, a promiscuous python, an unborn elephant, an angel ("a genuine angel...such a one as would not be greatly missed in angelic society"), assassins, pirates, millionaires and an invisible messianic dog who lives in a paint pot (invisible-coloured paint of course). There is no real beginning, middle or end, and what plot there is is mostly foretold by the characters (who tend to talk in prophecy). I love it.

Here are a few more which I cannot really bring myself to recommend: *Threshold* by David R. Palmer (NEL, £2.95): a rich businessman is kidnapped by a beautiful girl who becomes his lover and teaches him enough magic to save the galaxy – real megalomaniac wish-fulfilment here. *Man of Two Worlds* by Frank and Brian Herbert (Futura, £3.50): lengthy, lighthearted rubbish, almost a parody of Herbert's *Heaven Makers*. *Planetary Legion for Peace* by Romulus Rexner (Veritas, £4.95): well-meaning nonsense about "progressive" forces, something like the militant wing of the Woodcraft Folk, taking over Earth to abolish nationalism and war – not quite badly written enough to be a turkey. *Star Rebel and Rebel's Quest* by F.M. Busby (Futura, £2.50 each): traditional space-opera: the hero of the sequel is abused in basic training and vows revenge on the Empire – competent, but we've read it all before. *The Hub* by Chris Beebe (Macdonald, £10.95): genuinely unreadable – don't Macdonald & Co employ editors? *Hardwired* by Walter John Williams (Macdonald, £10.95): competent journey to cyberpunk territory, obviously owing a lot to Bill Gibson and Roger Zelazny (explicit references to *Damnation Alley*). *The Timeliner Trilogy* by

Richard C. Meredith (Arrow, £3.95): well put together alternate-worlds saga dedicated to "the memory of H. Beam Piper"; the three component books (*At the Narrow Passage*, *No Friend* and *Vestiges of Time*) are all exactly the same length – at nearly two pages for a penny there are more bangs for your buck than in the average paperback. *The Garden of the Shaped* by Sheila Finch (Bantam, \$3.50): dynastic goings-on in a world inhabited by various races of genetically engineered humans who do not realize that they are still secretly ruled by the near-immortal survivors of the original colonists. (Ken Brown)

*Emergence* by David Palmer (NEL, £2.95): highly-compressed narrative of prepubescent member of select band post-holocaust post hominems (sole survivors after Sapiens snuffed out), coping with lone struggle to reunite self with breed, disarm doomsday weapon in geosynchronous kamikaze caper – staggering good fun, oddly touching, gripping, moving. *The Dream Wall* by Graham Dunstan Martin (Unwin, £2.95): rerun of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* based on 1984 – the Miners' strike. Full of entertainment, if you can bring yourself to enjoy the ironies of the worst imaginings of the tabloid editorials. *Sabella* by Tanith Lee (Unwin, £2.50): Enjoyable sf/fantasy/horror/mystery/romance about adventures of glamorous vampiress on evocative alien planet.

(Lee Montgomerie)

*The Enchantments of Flesh and Spirit* by Storm Constantine (Macdonald, £11.95) is billed as "The First Book of Wraeththu." Imagine 1980s Britain taken a few stages further: in the ruins of the northern cities a mutant child-man finds an androgynous race possessing magical powers – the Wraeththu. A human boy, Pellaz, is won over; in journeys and tribulations across an inhospitable world, he discovers his great destiny. Storm Constantine's imagery is often striking, but that destiny does not draw one on eagerly to the "Second Book of Wraeththu."

(Stephen O'Kane)

*Mort* by Terry Pratchett (Gollancz, £10.95), the fourth Discworld novel, is about a bungling young man who just happens to get set up as apprentice to Death Himself – who (inevitably, in the Discworld) turns out to like small cats, cocktails and formidable Ankh-Mopork curries. Full of rich invention and very funny indeed, it retains just enough of a serious plot to avoid being a total farce. The jokes will wear a bit thin one day, but (I hope) not yet, and not soon. *Bones of the Moon* by Jonathan Carroll (Century, £9.95; Arrow, £2.50) is an engaging and vivid fantasy about a woman's dream-

relationship with her aborted child. The real-life segments are perhaps over-sentimental (a touch of post-feminist ick) but the dream world, which slops over worryingly into real life, is powerfully realized.

*Eon* by Greg Bear (Legend, £4.95) may be an attempt on the mass market, for it's a hefty novel with a slightly tedious human-interest element. But its imaginative scope and power are impressive. An asteroid, transformed into a starship, enters the solar system: built by human beings, but not from this universe, it generates an enigmatic, artificial extension of geometry that reaches, apparently into an infinity of other universes. Bear resolutely refuses to be content with anything less than 20 impossible things before breakfast – and then he really gets going. *Chernobyl* by Frederik Pohl (Bantam Press, £4.95) is not an sf novel but a "faction" about the Soviet reactor explosion. Although it does not idealize the USSR in any way, it does treat that country and its people with respect. The disaster was terrible, but it was handled with courage, decision and tremendous ability. Western fiction – even sf – still tends to treat Russians as evil or stupid: Pohl's novel is something of a breakthrough.

(Andy Robertson)

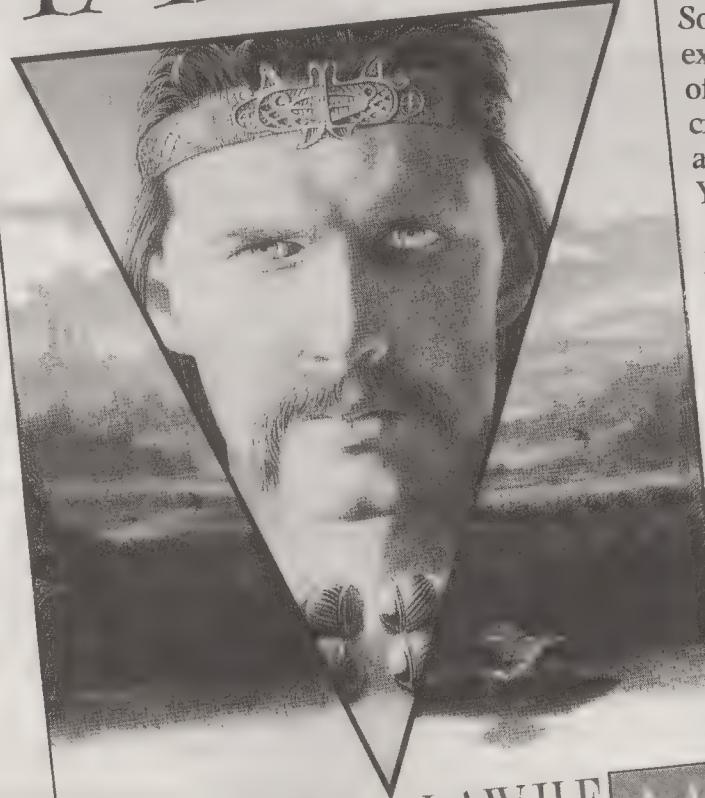
## Non-Fiction

*Kurt Vonnegut: A Comprehensive Bibliography* by Asa B. Pieratt, Julie Huffman-Klinkowitz and Jerome Klinkowitz (Archon Books; available in the UK from Clio Distribution Services, £31.05) is well-nigh impossible to fault. It lists every appearance of every Vonnegut novel, short story and article. It gives full descriptive details of each book (in all languages), including the size of the initial print-runs (*Cat's Cradle*, 1963, 6,000 copies; *Slaughterhouse-Five*, 1969, 10,000 copies; *Breakfast of Champions*, 1974, 100,000 copies – and onwards and upwards). It also lists Vonnegut's student writings (from 1941) and has an annotated secondary bibliography. A labour of love, this 300-page book fulfils its brief admirably. Although we haven't been sent a British review copy as yet, I'd like to mention that the third edition of *Anatomy of Wonder: A Critical Guide to Science Fiction*, edited by Neil Barron, is now out (Bowker, \$39.95). It has increased in size to 874 pages (from 724 pages in the 1981 edition), and much of the new matter has been written by the perspicacious Brian Stableford. While we all await the long-delayed second edition of the Nicholls/Clute *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, Barron's book is undoubtedly the best one-volume reference work on sf available.

# STEPHEN LAWHEAD

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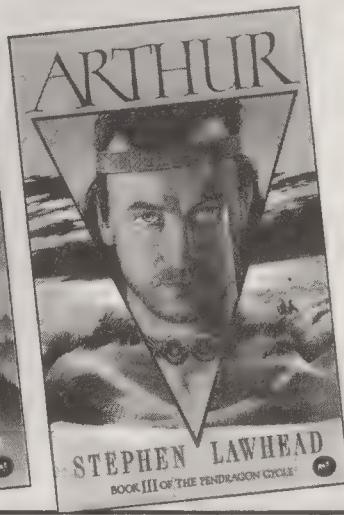
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My own book **Imaginary People: A Who's Who of Modern Fictional Characters** (Grafton, 514 pages, £14.95) was published late in 1987, so I was interested to receive two other works which seem to be competing for a similar patch of turf. **The Encyclopedia of Super Villains** by Jeff Rovin (Facts on File, \$29.95; no British price shown) is a companion to the same author's earlier volume on superheroes. Over 400 pages, copiously illustrated and well indexed, it contains fun-packed entries on almost a thousand magically endowed bad guys, most of them from comics, but some from films, TV, the pulps and elsewhere. Dracula and Dr Fu Manchu have long entries (the latter under "D", which strikes me as a perverse ordering), as indeed they should, but the bulk of the characters represented are small fry, ranging from The Abomination to Zodiac. Alas, the American bias ensures that there are no entries for Zenith the Albino, Waldo the Wonderman or any of those marvellous Sexton Blake adversaries. Nevertheless, I wish I'd had access to a copy of Rovin's book when I was preparing my own (wider-ranging) Who's Who. I'm sure I would have found Denis Gifford's less handsomely produced **Encyclopedia of Comic Characters** (Longman, 256 pages, £12.95) very useful too – although it suffers from the opposite fault of being parochially British. Our own beloved Dennis the Menace (of Beano fame) is in here, but not his American counterpart. Again, this guide to over 1200 comic characters is heavily illustrated and packed with relevant lore. Gifford is the grand master of cultural trivia.

(David Pringle)

## Also Received

### Recommended:

**Non-Stop** by Brian Aldiss (Grafton, £2.95). The author's first sf novel (from 1958). The quintessential generation-starship story.

**The Terminal Beach** by J.G. Ballard (Carroll & Graf, \$3.50). First ever US edition of the full text of this superb collection. Most of the stories are sf but for some reason they've labelled it "Fantasy."

**Blood Music** by Greg Bear (Legend, £2.95). Now established as one of the great sf novels. First British paperback. **Tiger! Tiger!** by Alfred Bester (Penguin, £3.95). Large-format "Classic SF" reprint – the late Bester's finest novel (also known as *The Stars My Destination*), and most welcome at this time.

**Who Made Stevie Crye?** by Michael Bishop (Headline, £4.95). First British edition of a memorable horror novel (reviewed in IZ 10).

**Ancient of Days** by Michael Bishop

(Paladin, £4.95). Another excellent Bishop novel – about a "swart and gnomish" member of the species Homo Habilis, and his attempts to fit into modern American society.

**The Day It Rained Forever** by Ray Bradbury (Penguin, £3.95). Well-known collection from 1959, reissued in the "Classic SF" line. Contains what is perhaps Bradbury's best single story: "And the Rock Cried Out."

**The Doll Who Ate His Mother** by Ramsey Campbell (Century, £10.95; Arrow, £2.95). Re-release of Campbell's hair-raising first novel.

**Best SF of the Year 16 ed.** Terry Carr (Gollancz, £11.95 hc; £3.95 pb). Carr's final anthology, alas – with stories by Kim Stanley Robinson, Lucius Shepard, Robert Silverberg, John Varley, Ian Watson and others.

**Babel-17** by Samuel R. Delany and **Gladiator-at-Law** by Frederik Pohl and C.M. Kornbluth (Gollancz, £3.95 each). Volumes 17 and 18 in the VG "Classic SF" series. Unexceptionable choices.

**Time Out of Joint** by Philip K. Dick (Carroll & Graf, \$3.95). Reissue of "the classic novel of reality displacement," with an afterword by Lou Stathis.

**VALIS** by Philip K. Dick (Kerosina, £13.95). First world hardcover of Dick's strangest book, which Kim Stanley Robinson (in a new afterword) describes as "a monument to a mind that had pulled itself back together, after struggling on the brink."

**Theatre of Timesmiths** by Garry Kilworth (Unwin, £2.95). Perhaps this author's best sf novel to date. Hardcover was reviewed by Mary Gentle in IZ 9.

**Science Fiction: The 100 Best Novels** by David Pringle (Carroll & Graf, \$7.95). First US paperback of this book which was originally released in Britain by Xanadu Publications in 1985. **Medusa's Children** by Bob Shaw (VGSF, £2.50). A novel which explores the Bermuda Triangle mystery in sf terms. Enjoyable nonsense.

**The Dreaming Jewels** by Theodore Sturgeon (Carroll & Graf, \$3.95). Sf/fantasy about a persecuted boy who joins a carnival. Enduring stuff from 1950. **The Peace War and Marooned in Real Time** by Vernor Vinge (Pan, £2.95 each). Sf novels about the consequences of one-way time travel via force-fields. Imaginative and zestful.

### Others:

**The Troll's Grindstone** by Elizabeth H. Boyer (Corgi, £2.95). The Alfar strike again – at great length, and for the fifth time.

**Martians, Go Home** by Frederic Brown (Grafton, £2.95). Amusing invasion-of-Earth novel from 1955 – rumoured to be a film soon.

**The Dreamstone** by C.J. Cherryh (VGSF, £2.50). Proficient Celtic fantasy. First half of a 1983 DAW Books

two-parter. Sequel, *The Tree of Swords and Jewels*, to follow from VGSF.

**Throne of Fools** by Adrian Cole (Unwin, £3.50). "Book Two of the Omaran Saga." Vigorous 400-page fantasy with all the ingredients.

**Bagdad** by Ian Dennis (Unwin, £2.95). Humorous Arabian Nights fantasy by a Canadian writer.

**The Preserving Machine** by Philip K. Dick (Grafton, £3.50). Good collection of sf stories. Contains the lengthy "What the Dead Men Say," which was dropped from the previous UK paperback edition (Pan, 1972).

**A Darkness at Sethanon** by Raymond E. Feist (Grafton, £3.50). "The triumphant finale to the Riftwar Saga." Like Donaldson and Eddings, this author seems to have become a great commercial success. We can't really see why.

**Tool of the Trade** by Joe Haldeman (Gollancz, £10.95). Effective East/West thriller which is also borderline sf.

**The Timekeeper Conspiracy** by Simon Hawke (Headline, £2.50). "Timewars Book Two." In this one the time travellers meet D'Artagnan.

**Twisting the Rope** by R.A. MacAvoy (Bantam, £2.50). More of a mystery novel than a fantasy – sequel to the enjoyable *Tea with the Black Dragon*. **Star Man's Son** by Andre Norton. Juvenile adventure in a post-holocaust world. This is the novel which kicked off the whole Norton phenomenon in 1952.

**Less Than Human** by Charles Platt (Grafton, £2.95). Humorous tale of a robot who fell to Earth.

**The Song of Homana** by Jennifer Roberson (Corgi, £2.95). "Chronicles of the Cheysuli, Book Two." Dedicated to Marion Zimmer Bradley, who has a lot to answer for.

**Sentinels from Space and Three to Conquer** by Eric Frank Russell (Metheuen, £2.95 each). Enjoyable sf oldies from the 1950s. Jack L. Chalker loves 'em, and the second of these titles was once commended by William S. Burroughs...

**Bronwyn's Bane** by Elizabeth Scarborough (Bantam, £2.95). Still more Celtic fantasy.

**Up the Line** by Robert Silverberg (VGSF, £2.95). Time travel to 12th-century Byzantium. (A 1969 novel.)

**Thirst II: The Plague** by Guy N. Smith (NEL, £1.95). Paperback-original horror from an author who doesn't 'alf churn them out.

**Trollnight** by Peter Tremayne (Sphere, £2.75). "Hideous powers of primeval terror..." Routine horror from this Irish author who also knows how to churn them...

**Star Healer** by James White (Futura, £2.50). About a giant hospital in space. Another of the amiable "Sector General" series.

# BACK ISSUES

All back issues except No. 5 are still available from 124 Osborne Rd., Brighton, BN1 6LU, UK. They are £1.95 each (£2.50 each overseas). Please make your cheques or postal orders payable to Interzone. Contents of back issues:

- 1: "The New Rays" by M. John Harrison; "Kitemaster" by Keith Roberts; "The Cabinet of Edgar Allan Poe" by Angela Carter; "Guesting" by John Sladek; "The Brothel in Rosenstrasse" by Michael Moorcock.
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- 3: "The Dissemblers" by Garry Kilworth; "Overture for 'A Midsummer Night's Dream'" by Angela Carter; "No Coward Soul" by Josephine Saxton; "Cheek to Cheek" by Nicholas Allan; "Saving the Universe" by David Garnett.
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- 5: "Something Coming Through" by Cherry Wilder; "The Monroe Doctrine" by Neil Ferguson; "The Views of Mohammed El Hassif" by John Hendry; "Radical Architecture" by Roger Dean (art feature); "Angela's Father" by L. Hluchan Sintetos; "Kitecadet" by Keith Roberts.
- 6: "The Unconquered Country" by Geoff Ryman; "Kept Women" by Margaret Welbank (art feature); "Life in the Mechanist/Shaper Era" by Bruce Sterling; "Tissue Ablation and Variant Regeneration" by Michael Blumlein.
- 7: "Unmistakably the Finest" by Scott Bradfield; "The Electric Zoo" by Chris Jones (art feature); "Dreamers" by Kim Newman; "Strange Memories of Death" by Philip K. Dick; "Experiment with Time" by M.J. Fitzgerald; "McGonagall's Lear" by Andy Souter; "What I Believe" by J.G. Ballard.
- 8: "The Object of the Attack" by J.G. Ballard; "The Gods in Flight" by Brian Aldiss; "Canned Goods" by Thomas M. Disch; "Synaptic Intrigue" by Richard Kadrey (art feature); "The Luck in the Head" by M. John Harrison; "Fragments of a Hologram Rose" by William Gibson; "Spiral Winds" by Garry Kilworth.
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- 11: "The Bob Dylan Tambourine Software . . ." by Michael Bishop; "Little Ilya and Spider and Box" by Paul J. McAuley; "The Fire Catcher" by Richard Kadrey; "Laser Smith's Space Academy" by George Parkin (comic strip); "A Young Man's Journey to Viriconium" by M. John Harrison; "Instructions for Exiting This Building . . ." by Pamela Zoline.
- 12: "The Man Who Walked on the Moon" by J.G. Ballard; "The People on the Precipice" by Ian Watson; Interview with William Gibson; "If the Driver Vanishes . . ." by Peter T. Garrett; "Escapist Literature" by Barrington J. Bayley; "Rhinestone Manifesto" by Don Webb; "Randy and Alexei Go Jaw Jaw" by Neil Ferguson.
- 13: "When the Timegate Failed" by Ian Watson; Interview with Clive Barker; "The Compassionate, the Digital" by Bruce Sterling; "Finn" by Sue Thomason; "Patricia's Profession" by Kim Newman; "The King of the Hill" by Paul J. McAuley; "The New SF" by Vincent Omniaveritas; "Caverns" by David Zindell.
- 14: "The Winter Market" by William Gibson; Interview with Bruce Sterling; "The One and Only Tale . . ." by John Brosnan; "The Vivarium" by Garry Kilworth; "A Multiplication of Lives" by Diana Reed; "Goodbye – and Thanks for the SF" by Allen A. Lucas; "The Ibis Experiment" by S.W. Widdowson.
- 15: "And He Not Busy Being Born . . ." by Brian Stableford; art feature by Jim Burns; "The Protector" by Rachel Pollack; "Sex Change Operation Shock" by Gwyneth Jones; "The Brains of Rats" by Michael Blumlein; "His Vegetable Wife" by Pat Murphy; "The Cup is the Wine" by Josephine Saxton; Interview with Iain Banks; "The Final Episode" by Shirley Weinland.
- 16: "Freezeframe" by Gregory Benford; "Jingling Geordie's Hole" by Ian Watson; Interview with John Shirley; "Soundspinner" by D.C. Haynes; "Hard Work" by Thomas M. Disch; Interview with Gene Wolfe; "Future Fish" by Barbara Hills; "Adam Found" by Simon Ounsley.
- 17: "As Big as the Ritz" by Gregory Benford; "Screaming of the Beetle" by SMS; "Boiled Alive" by Ramsey Campbell; Interview with M. John Harrison; "Paths of Dying" by Simon Ounsley; "Fountain of Time" by Peter Lamborn Wilson; "Mind Vampires" by Greg Egan; "When Jesus Comes Down the Chimney" by Ian Watson.
- 18: "The Second Third of C" by Neil Ferguson; Interview with Gwyneth Jones; "A Dragon for Seyour Chan" by Paul J. McAuley; "The Next-But-One Man" by Kim Newman; "Assyria" by Christina Lake; "Goodbye Houston Street" by Richard Kadrey; "The Xeelee Flower" by S.M. Baxter.
- 19: "Love Sickness, Part 1" by Geoff Ryman; Interview with Rudy Rucker; "Sexual Chemistry" by Brian Stableford; "Foresight" by Michael Swanwick; "A Gift from the Culture" by Iain M. Banks.
- 20: "Krash-Bangg Joe" by Eric Brown; Interview with John Crowley; "Dop\*elgan\*er" by Garry Kilworth; art feature by Ian Miller; "The Philosophical Stone" by Ken Wisman; "Layers of Meaning" by Brian Stableford; "Love Sickness, Part 2" by Geoff Ryman.
- 21: "The Only One" by David S. Garnett; Interviews with J.G. Ballard and K.W. Jeter; "The Decline of Sunshine" by Cherry Wilder; "The Boys" by Charles Stross; "Memories of the Body" by Lisa Tuttle; "Among the Wounded" by Christopher Burns; "The Good Robot" by SMS; "The Girl Who Died for Art" by Eric Brown.

# LETTERS

Dear Editors:

Some thoughts on the stories in *IZ* 21. "Krash-Bangg Joe and the Pineal-Zen Equation" was an impressive debut for Eric Brown. He manages to create a world of the future with all the sleaze and street credibility of the better cyberpunk, while keeping the technology safely in the background so that his very real characters can dominate centre stage. This story has a gritty, realistic feel to it, lacking in so much sf. But it remains a simple boy meets girl story, two people in a situation we can identify with. The result is a marvellously readable piece of fiction that treads the fine line between genuine emotion and sickly sentimentalism with real skill.

Garry Kilworth's "Dop\*elgan\*er" is a witty and ingenious variation on an old theme, such fun to read that not even its ultimate predictability detracts from the overall effect – and with a real warning as to the dangers of wasting the opportunities we are given. "The Philosophical Stone" by Ken Wisman was another piece of bright and breezy writing, a wry tale that for pure entertainment value is the issue's best.

Brian Stableford struck rock bottom with "Layers of Meaning." Why on earth did *IZ* print such quasi-mystical claptrap? Finally, "Love Sickness" by Geoff Ryman: I liked this story but it could have been done better. For a start, the length and the two-issue format didn't really work for me. A lot of thought obviously went into Mr Ryman's world, with a wealth of incidental invention to give it depth. Similarly, a lot went into the characters, to make them believable despite their essential weirdness. But there was simply so much going on that it all seemed cramped. This is a poor novelette with the potential to grow into an excellent novel.

Peter Tennant

Thetford, Norfolk

Dear Editors:

As someone who has enjoyed reading science fiction for a number of years, I have to say that I won't be renewing my subscription to your publication. Some, no doubt, enjoy wading through pages of characterless, turgid prose by J.G. Ballard, Ian Watson and the like... what, for the average person, would be the equivalent of reading *Mein Kampf* on a wet Monday in Ulan Bator, or watching paint dry... I enjoy the real stuff, not tacky prose that appeals to some turd of a book critic. The only genuine work in the pages of your publication was the short story "The King of the Hill" by Paul J. McAuley. The only one with real imagination and

genuine ability to tell a story was... Mr McAuley.

Bill Fraser

Newmilns, Ayrshire

**Editors' response:** Sorry to be losing you, Mr Fraser. We can't satisfy all tastes all of the time – but you will have noticed that we do have a new Paul McAuley story in this issue.

Dear Editors:

In my twenty years of reading sf I have never read any magazine, pro or semi-pro, which amazes, delights and excites me as consistently as *Interzone* does. I love your willingness to take chances, to publish controversial stories like Michael Blumlein's and powerful graphic work like the strip by SMS. And I have to thank you for introducing me to Geoff Ryman, perhaps the most consistently inventive and exciting sf writer I've ever read.

In short, three cheers! More please! I'm interested in acquiring all the back issues I don't already have, and also possibly in entering a lifetime subscription with you...

Jeff Svoboda

London

Dear Editors:

This letter was prompted by John Clute's book review in *IZ* 21. Not having read *The Legacy of Heorot* by Niven, Pournelle and Barnes I can't say much about it, but that is not the point. The majority of the space was used to make personal attacks on the authors and to expound the reviewer's politics, which can be basically summed up as: all Americans are wicked fascists. If I want this kind of thing I'll read *Socialist Worker* or *Pravda*. Larry Niven has written some good stuff in his time, *Ringworld* and *Protector* for example. So-called "hard" sf can be just as good as any other kind. At least Niven knows something about science, but I suppose scientists are all foul militaristic, imperialistic running dogs of the capitalistic jackals, eh? Some of us actually want to enjoy ourselves, at times like this we put down our textbooks on the class struggle and dialectical materialism and turn to something like *I, Robot* or *2010*. I shall read what I like and damn the sneering critics...

All right, ranting over. You won't print it but at least I feel better after that. Apart from the reviews I think *IZ* is a great magazine – I'd be stupid to subscribe otherwise. How about more frequent issues?

Martin H. Smith

Castleford, W. Yorks.

**Editors' response:** We think you've made some unwarranted assumptions about John Clute's political views. *Interzone* should be going to a two-monthly schedule from mid-1988.

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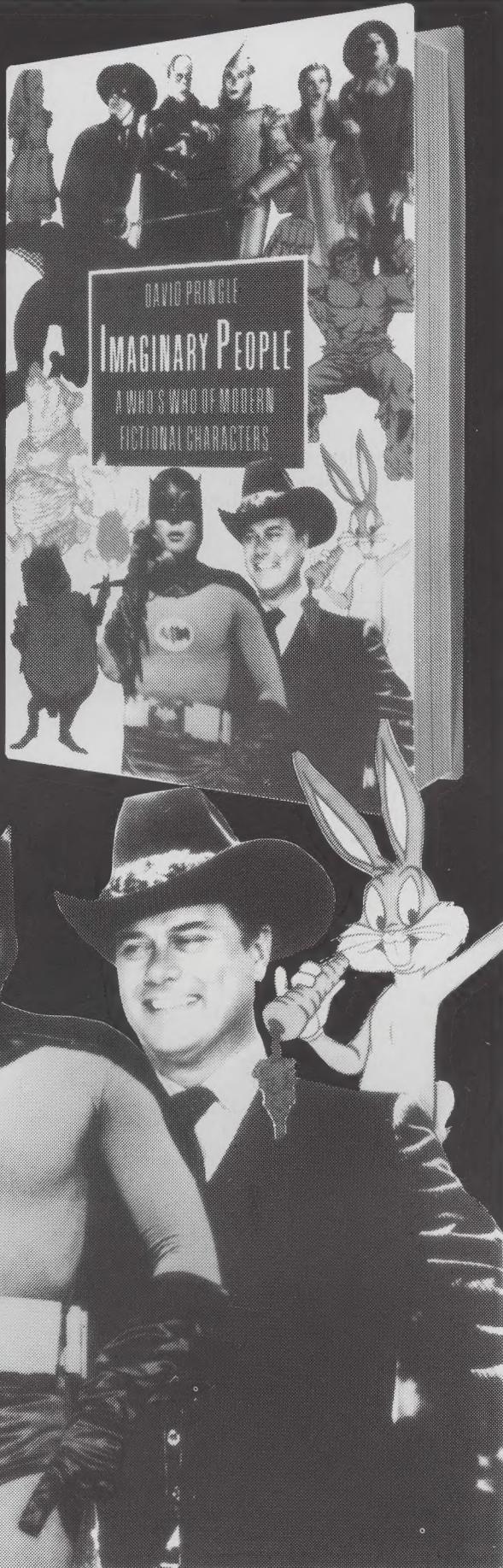
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